

**I Became the
Secretary of a
Hero! Vol. 2
(Secretary Hero)**

Tsukasa Yamazaki

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Volume 2

Tsukasa Yamazaki

Illustration by Kiyu Kanae

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I Became the Secretary of a Hero!, Volume 2
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I Became the Secretary of a Hero!

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LAST TIME

AFTER RETURNING HOME FROM A HARD DAY AT THE OFFICE, PARALEGAL AKI KONISHI PURSUES A MAN KIDNAPPING HER BABY SISTER OUT HER WINDOW THROUGH A PORTAL TO ANOTHER WORLD. RESCUED BY THE HERO AND HIS PARTY OF ADVENTURERS, AKI LEARNS THE DARK LORD IS RESPONSIBLE FOR TAKING HER SISTER. WITH NO ALTERNATIVE, AKI JOINS THE HERO AS HIS SECRETARY IN AN ATTEMPT TO RESCUE HER SISTER FROM THE CLUTCHES OF THE EVIL DARK LORD! YET IN AN ODD TURN OF EVENTS, SHE IS REUNITED WITH NAKO AT THE FIRST TOWN THEY VISIT AFTER LEAVING THE CAPITAL.

NAKO HAS COME TO FORM A TRUCE BETWEEN THE HERO AND DARK LORD, BUT THEY WILL HAVE TO POWER UP A MIRROR CAPABLE OF TELEPORTING THEM TO THE DARK LORD'S CASTLE BEFORE NEGOTIATIONS CAN BE ESTABLISHED.

LEAVING THAT JOB TO THEIR TRUSTY PRIEST JOHANN AND THE SELF-PROCLAIMED GENIUS MAGE LEO, AKI AND ELIAS SET OFF ON A MYSTERIOUS QUEST WITH THE THIEF MINA AND MINSTREL LOUIS. WHAT AWAITS THEM AT THE BOTTOM OF THE ANCIENT RUINS?



Chapter 1: Ancient Ruins

DEEP within the shadows a flash of red hair and intelligent eyes gazed upon the unsuspecting Hero and his party. “Into the fray my easily baited prey steps. While goddesses, world leaders, and dark forces play their games, I finally get to have my share of the fun. Let’s enjoy this liittle dance, Heroboy.” A light chuckle echoed through the cave as the presence all but vanished to be filled by nothing but the pitter-patter of droplets falling from the stalactites.

“...**THIS** place is kinda creepy if you ask me.” Mina shuddered as she swept her gaze over the cave walls and rounded ceiling.

Aki nodded in wholehearted agreement as she strained her eyes on the too-dark-to-see path ahead and at her feet where water droplets pitter-pattered in a lyrical rhythm.

With all the moisture built up, the dark limestone cave was slick enough that Aki feared she might slip and fall on the gravel if she didn’t pay close attention to her every step.

Light reflected off the wet stone from the lantern Elias held as he walked in front of the party, sending shadows dancing across the walls. The hanging lantern’s glow flickered like a ghost beckoning them into the chilly dark beyond.

Mina’s comment echoed off the cold walls. Elias stopped their forward trek and turned toward the women. “...This cave definitely has an unusually strong level of water element. It’s rare for any one element to be this dominant in a confined space.”

“...What’s a water element?” Aki tilted her head at the new term.

Louis, who was heading up the rear, broke it down for her. “Think of it like this: elements are the key component that all matter is composed of. It’s believed that everything in this world is made from elemental components.”

“Those are new concepts to me...” Aki pressed her fingers against her temples. Her knowledge of science collided with the fantasy talk, making it hard to imagine what he was talking about.

Mina glanced over her shoulder and smiled at her. “Aki, when the Creation Goddess created all things in this world, she used the elements as its energy and life source. Basically, this world runs by circulating the energy contained within the elements. And each element has its own unique attributes.”

“The key element types are fire, water, wind, earth, light, and

dark,” Louis supplied.

Aki tapped her finger against her chin. “The world exists by circulating the energy contained within the elements...”

Her thoughts went straight to the explanation Johann gave her back in the castle: *“Filling this world with Creation Energy is what allows it to exist.”*

In other words, Creation Energy was just another word for the energy housed within the elements. And it was because this elemental energy was being depleted in the process of running the world that it needed to be reinjected on a regular basis.

And the ones responsible for maintaining the cycle of injecting the world with a new dose of energy are the Hero and Dark Lord who were created by the Goddess for that very purpose. Aki’s gaze naturally slid over to Elias. *Does that mean that Elias was created by the elements? The very energy of this world?*

Elias met her gaze and shook his head several times in warning not to let her thoughts travel any farther down that rabbit hole. He was reminding her not to bring it up in front of Mina and Louis who had no idea the Hero and Dark Lord were artificial life forms born of Creation Energy.

Louis, unaware of Aki and Elias’s hidden exchange, twisted his platinum bangs in his fingertips and remarked, “...This humidity is on a scale of its own. You can practically feel the moisture forming on your skin. Using water magic will be cinch, but it’ll be hard to work any kind of fire magic.”

“Oh yeah,” Elias clapped his hands once, “Minstrels use the same Lunar Magic as Mages, right?”

“Right. We have a different skill tree from Mages though. While Mages do a lot of heavy damage over time, Minstrels use a lot of support magic that inflict status effects.”

“Hey, Louis, is it the conflicting relationship between water and fire that makes it hard to use one where the other is more prolific?” Aki asked out of curiosity.

Louis fell into step next to her and nodded as if she had asked a question with an obvious answer. “Correct. Lunar Magic spells are activated by borrowing the elemental energy around you, but you have to be aware of conflicting elements such as water and fire. Conflicting elements greatly weaken in areas where their opposite dominates the field.” He directed his gaze toward the dark depths of the cave.

“In the case of this cave, the water element is abnormally strong, so water magic is much easier to cast and far more powerful than normal. On the opposite hand, it might be easier to rub sticks together to create a fire than try to use fire magic here.”

“Huh. Then you can make the most of your spells by taking advantage of the dominant element type,” she summarized.

“You’ve got it,” Louis smiled.

I bet Leo knows a lot about this stuff and would love to talk about it if he had the chance. I get the feeling someone with his insane level is capable of scraping together barely existent elements to force a spell into working where it normally wouldn’t. Aki giggled to herself as she imagined Leo munching on sweets as he complained about how tired he was after doing the impossible with magic.

THEY idly chatted away the time as they advanced deeper into the cave. The narrow tunnel path eventually gave way to a massive opening with a raised ceiling.

Wow! Amazing!

Aki hadn’t expected such a wide space to exist in the back of the cave. Some of the ceiling rock had crumbled over time, letting a single ray of sunlight stream in from outside. The dull light seemed mystical as it faintly illuminated the dark cavern.

Huge stone ruins loomed quietly along the rock wall in front of them. A number of finely sculpted columns with plant carvings supported the building that looked more like an ancient temple rather than a ruin.

Mina ran over to the staircase leading up to the temple ruins and looked up with a hand cupped over her eyes. “Oh my, this is a stunning temple! Looks like we’re finally at our destination!”

Round marble columns surrounded the outer sanctum on a stylobate carved from the cave’s bare rock surface. Pieces were missing from the half-broken columns, and the fragments littered the stylobate.

Seems like this temple was built a long time ago... Aki took in the ruins beside Mina.

Louis walked up to them from behind. “Looks like it was built using ancient Theophyllic architecture.”

Where have I heard Theophyllic before? Isn’t the Kingdom’s Crown Prince called Arnold Claudius Theophilus? Then maybe Theophyllic is an architecture style taken from the royal family’s name.

Louis tapped the back of his hand against a column. “Aki, Theophyllic architecture is a building style that has been passed down since ancient times. It mixes refined and *déagé* elements. See the elaborate embossed carvings at the top of the columns here? It’s gorgeous to look at, but is rarely used now because of the amount of time and effort it takes.”

“Cool! You’re so insightful, Louis!” Aki exhaled in awe of his smooth architectural style breakdown.

Louis was versed in many disciplines, perhaps because he hailed from nobility. With his expert knowledge, Aki knew he’d get along great with Leo and Johann who were both experts in their own respective fields.

He playfully combed his hand through his bangs at her honest compliment. “Thanks. I’m always happy to boast that I’m more informed when it comes to the arts than most people.”

Meanwhile, Mina was staring hard at the ruin wall behind him. “Hey, there are a bunch of letters carved tightly together on the outer walls. What are they for?”

“Oh, let me see.” Aki moved beside her, brought her face close to the wall, and strained to see the letters engraved in the stone surface.

Intricate little letters were carved into the entire wall. To the untrained eye, it’d look like a normal pattern for artistic purposes.

Louis ran the soft side of his thumb along the letters. “Hmm. I’d say it’s telling some sort of story. A myth, perhaps? Doesn’t seem like a story I’ve read before... Plus, since it’s written in the ancient script, I won’t understand the whole picture without properly translating it.”

“You can read the ancient script, Louis?” Mina looked at him wide-eyed.

The corner of his lips slightly curled. “Only the easy stuff. I definitely can’t speed read through it.”

“That’s still amazing. Wasn’t the ancient script used back during the Creation Era? I’d heard only scholars were capable of reading it.”

“Thanks for comparing me to a scholar. I’m honestly happy to be complimented by you.”

“There you go deflecting my comments again!”

Aki laughed behind her hand. Louis and Mina got along so well she had a hard time believing they had only recently met. Their charming and friendly personalities gave them the advantage of creating instant friends with almost anyone.

“Mina, can I borrow you? The front entrance won’t open. Can you unlock it with a Thief skill?” Elias beckoned her with a troubled smile from where he was investigating the entrance to the ruins.

Aki jogged over to Elias with Mina. The double-leaf stone doors were firmly locked in place and didn’t budge no matter how much Elias pushed or pulled on them.

Mina perched her left hand on her hip. “Hmph. An obstacle right off the bat, huh? No point in us coming this far if we can’t even worm our way inside the ruins. Give me some time to try a few things.”

She approached the door, examined the upper and lower parts, the left and right edges, the base, the stylobate, and tried to unlock it

by casting a small amount of magic here and there. The door didn't react noticeably to her attempts.

Mina, who had pulled out all sorts of Thief gadgets from her pouch and nimbly tested various lock-picking skills, threw her hands in the air and strolled back over to Aki shrugging her shoulders. "It's no use. There's nothing for me to pick at or unlock. It's like a door without a knob or hinges."

"Did they make it so no one could enter from the front?"

If the temple ruins were purposefully built to elude entry through the front entrance, would it actually be possible to open it?

Aki casually reached for the door, and the second her fingertips brushed the smooth stone, black light shone from the carved letters and spread along the walls and door like ripples on a pond.

A sinister jet-black glow began dyeing every corner of the ruins.

Wh-What just happened?!

"What's going on?!"

Louis gasped and Mina froze before the ruins emitting light as if it were a sleeping creature that had come back to life. The cave, which was slightly brightened by the sunlight seeping inside from the ceiling, turned darker than night from the eerie light given off by the ruins.

"Are you all ok—" Just as Elias reached for Aki, she buckled over from intense pain that felt like a knife piercing through her skull.

"O-Ow!" She clasped her hands to her forehead; it felt hot enough to burn her skin. The agonizing pain had her clawing away at her forehead until her fingers touched something that felt like the uneven lines of a carving.

Some sort of pattern is engraved in my forehead?!

"Aki?! Are you okay?! What's going on—" Elias rushed over, dropped to his knees beside her, and helped her sit up so she wasn't face down on the stone ground.

She looked back into his worried green eyes and frantically tried to gesture to her forehead through the mind-numbing pain. "Elias... my forehead...it burns..." she moaned.

"Your forehead?!" He gently pulled her hands away and looked at her forehead. He sharply inhaled at what he saw there. A mysterious crest that looked like a crescent moon embracing the full moon had emerged on her skin. "What in the world is—"

Elias's flabbergasted utterance sounded as if it came from the opposite end of the cave for how faintly she heard it through the unbearable agony she felt. The pain from her forehead was too much to bear, and her consciousness began going in and out. Barely holding on, she desperately clung to Elias's cloak.

"Aki! Aki! Stay with me!"

It narrowly registered with her that Elias was shaking her. But

her consciousness swayed as if it was trying to escape the unrelenting torture, and then she lost the sound of his voice and the sensation of him shaking her.

Elias, Mina, Louis...I'm sorry...

Her words of apology left unsaid, Aki finally caved in to the pain and lost consciousness.

ELIAS all but ignored the encroaching darkness seeping from the ruins behind him, his attention focused on shaking Aki awake. "Aki! Aki! Come back to me!"

No matter how many times he called out to her, she lay limply in his arms with her eyes firmly pressed shut. The mysterious crest still loomed on top of her forehead emitting a black light the same color as the ruins as if it were resonating with whatever had triggered.

What in the blue blazes is this crest?!

None of the records ever mentioned or depicted such a thing. Was it some sort of magic? A curse? Whatever it was, suppressing the crest seemed like the only way to bring her back to him.

Mina and Louis were both running around checking the ruin walls and entrance for clues. Mina examined the entrance, while Louis launched viable Lunar Magic spells in hopes of one counteracting what did this to Aki.

Nothing they did had any effect on Aki's crest or the ominously black light radiating from the ruins. Sweat streamed from her forehead and her lips grew paler by the second.

What should I do? What can I do?! Elias held Aki against his chest. I have to protect her! Just like how she saved me from the brink of despair, I have to save her.

Elias stood up with Aki leaning lifelessly against him. If the ruins activated because they responded to Aki somehow, he must cut off that connection in order to save her. Since he couldn't think of a way to stop the connection; he used blunt force to break down the whole door that now pulsed to some eerie and obscure beat.

He drew the Holy Sword with one hand. Brandishing it in front of him, he closed his eyes. "Please, give me the power to help her...!"

Grant me the strength to protect those dear to me as Hero!

With that silent prayer, Elias swung the sword down in a giant arc. The blade slammed against the door. White light rushed through the entire ruins when the blade cut into the stone, overwriting the dyed-black letters.

Elias instantly felt the same burning heat in his forehead and rammed the Holy Sword into the ground in order to keep himself

propped up on one knee.

“Agh...!”

“Elias! Aki!”

Mina dashed over to them the fastest and crouched down to support Elias from falling over on top of Aki who he stood protectively over. Hearing Mina’s scream, Louis raced over from the other side of the outer wall and brushed the bangs off of Elias’s forehead as he painfully moaned.

“...Is this...the sun?”

In direct contrast with Aki, the crest of a burning sun had emerged on Elias’s forehead.

“What in the world are these crests?!” Louis scoured his memories, but he had never come across anything like this in his research.

One crest looked like a moon and the other the sun. Did it have to do with the powers hidden within the Hero and his Right-hand?

As Louis contemplated the crests, the golden light that overwrote the black of the ruins eventually faded away as the two colors merged. At the same time, the closed door opened with an earth-shattering roar.

“No freakin’ way! It opened...! I don’t believe it!” Mina’s eyes were rounder than saucers as her jaw dropped.

Louis gently put his hand on Elias’s shoulder as the Hero frantically tried to stay up on one knee with Aki clutched to his chest. “...Elias? Are you okay? Are you conscious?”

He lightly shook his shoulder, and Elias, who had frozen in place with Aki, subtly shook his head. He turned his head toward Louis, focused his blurry vision on him, and smiled weakly. “Y-Yeah, somehow... The pain in my forehead has abated too.”

Louis closely observed his forehead. The crest that once ominously glowed there had vanished. Aki’s black crest left without a trace as well.

Elias gave her a small shake in his arms. “Aki? Are you all right? Can you hear me?”

“Ugh...”

The second time he shook her, she partially awoke and looked at him with unfocused eyes. As soon as she recognized him, tears spilled down her cheeks. “I-I’m all right...! Elias, I’m so sorry. Louis, Mina, I’m sorry.” She started to move away, but Elias wrapped both arms around her to make sure she was truly all right.

“Thank the Goddess that you are well... I was at such a loss when you were suffering.”

Louis put his hand to his chin as he watched over the pair rejoicing in each other’s safety. ...*A mysterious Shadow Tribesman lured*

Elias and Aki to these ruins through Mina, where a sun and moon crest appeared on both of their foreheads in reaction to touching the ruins, which correspondingly opened the door...

Each thread seemed unconnected at first, but might very well be connected by some unseen force. But solving that particular riddle required more information than they currently had.

The mysteries are only growing more convoluted. But it's a fact that in all the history pertaining to the Hero and Dark Lord, there were never any cases of the Dark Lord trying to make contact with the Hero or any records on a moon and sun crest.

Based on that alone, the tale of Hero Elias will be a heroic one passed down to future generations as groundbreaking history. I have my job cut out for me as the Minstrel chosen by Elias's party. I have to take responsibility for weaving the story he brings to life. Louis placed his hand over his heart in silent oath.

Elias rose to his feet and peered down at Aki's face as she stood snuggled against him. "Aki, did it cause any lasting damage or side effects? We can turn back right now if you are in pain or fatigued."

"Nope, I'm good. I feel perfectly fine right now, so much so that the pain from moments ago almost seems like a dream."

"...Really? I don't mind advancing inside the ruins if you are okay, but don't push yourself. Be sure to tell me the moment it becomes too much for you."

She laughed with amusement at the finger he held up in the air. "Got it! You know, Elias, I think you have a hidden Older Brother Attribute that pops up at times like this."

"What kind of attribute is that?" Elias tilted his head to the side in puzzlement. Mina burst out laughing at what he clearly didn't understand.

They must be okay if they're well enough to joke around. Louis smiled as he watched over them. Still, he had to stay on guard for them since there was no telling when those inexplicable crests would reappear and bring them misery.

Chances were high that entering the temple ruins would bring out the crests again if they were as connected as they seemed to be.

Elias flicked his white cloak behind him and gazed up at the open stone door. "All right, party, it's finally time to search the ancient ruins. Monsters will likely appear inside, so stay on full alert."

Chapter 2: A Little Hero

THEY stepped inside the ruins where a single stone path stretched into the darkness with gigantic humanoid statues lining the stone walls on either side, adding a sanctimonious flair to the otherwise eerie entrance.

Enumerations written in ancient script embossed the walls, and seemingly bottomless, pitch-black gutters flanked the narrow walkway. An endless free fall awaited anyone who fell from the bridge-like path.

Each statue lining the passage at equal intervals held a candle, which gave off light from its swaying flame. There was something creepy about how the candles were burning when there was no trace of a human presence—almost as if the ruins were awaiting their arrival. At the very least, the ruins were responding to their presence by providing illumination.

But it was thanks to that continuous candlelight that it was much easier to see where they were walking than it had been in the cavern tunnels, and it saved them the trouble of holding a lantern.

Aki restlessly looked around as she hugged her shoulders and shivered. “Does anyone else fear they’ll fall off the path into the literal abyss on either side of us? Or is it just me? And it’s unpleasantly chilly in here too...”

The stone walls trapped in the cold, and the air circulated differently from outside. Aki’s muttered comment echoed off the ruin walls, stopping Elias at the front of their party.

“These ruins are steeped in strong water magic, weakening the fire element that usually keeps the air temperature warm. Stay aware of your body temperature at all times, or else the cold might immobilize you,” he advised as he briskly strode over to Aki at the back of their line.

She looked up at him with a question in her eyes. He bent down and peered into them. “Aki, want to wear my cloak since you’re cold?”

“...Pardon?” Her eyes rounded at his unexpected offer.

Wearing Elias’s cloak—in other words, isn’t that like a girlfriend wearing her boyfriend’s shirt, or rather, cloak? No, no, no! Since when did I become Elias’s girlfriend?! I’m embarrassed at the wanderings of my own imagination!

Aki turned red and started fanning her face, but Elias didn’t notice her internal turmoil as he undid the feather emblem holding the cloak in place with a click. He took the pure white cloak in his hands and quietly held it in front of her.

"Here you go. Can you put it on by yourself?"

"Ah, uh... I can put it on... Are you sure it's okay for me to borrow it?" she timidly checked with him. Elias must've been cold after removing the cloak he always wore.

"Of course it's okay," he confirmed with an effervescent smile. "I don't mind one bit. It's more worrisome for me if you're cold. Besides, I've got a hardier build than most people." He cheerfully flexed his biceps for her.

Aki glanced over at Mina and Louis and realized they didn't look as cold as she felt even though they weren't dressed for the cold either.

It appeared a person's level had a direct effect on their temperature resistance: the higher their level, the higher their resistance to the cold.

"I'll take you up on your offer." Aki accepted the cloak and stared at it.

...How am I supposed to put this on? Do I throw it on over my shoulders and clasp it at my neck with the emblem?

Elias closely watched Aki as she stood there frozen with the cloak hanging from her hands like a banner, and let out a small chuckle. "It's difficult to figure out how to put on at first, right? Here, turn around for me."

He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her around. Taking the cloak from her, he draped it over her back, circled his arms around her chest, and snapped the emblem in place at her neck. The cloak cascaded down her back.

Elias's pure white cloak swished around her ankles.

"You're all set now! Face this way, Aki."

"O-Okay." Heart thumping in her ears, she turned toward Elias. He looked her up and down with a blank look on his face, then burst out laughing as if he were standing before an adorable forest animal.

"Yep, it's perfect on you! You look great! Wearing my cloak makes you look like a little hero." He patted her on the head several times.

...Is that supposed to be a compliment? Or is he teasing me?

Mina smacked her hands together. "Oh my, you're right! Aki's like a tiny, female hero, it's adorable! Like the hero you just want to protect."

Louis nodded several times in deep agreement. "Mm-hm. Lady Hero has quite the lovely ring to it; I can stand behind that. My pen could weave a most beautiful narrated poem if Aki were the Hero instead of Elias."

"...Louis, are you saying you're dissatisfied with me as your Hero?" Elias pouted, earning a few laughs from Mina and Louis.

Aki watched over them trying to appease their sulking Hero as she pulled the cloak with his lingering warmth closer. *It feels like Elias is protecting me up close. Considering how hard my heart is pounding just by wearing his cloak, I must really like Elias a lot.* She stifled the grin trying to stretch across her face as she thought about how handsome and cool he looked with just his coat on.

"All right, time to get moving again." Elias took control of the situation and had the party advance deeper into the ruins.

Before them a single stone path stretched endlessly into the candlelit darkness. What in the world awaited them at the end?

Thus, their first quest together began with excitement fluttering in their chests over the unknown adventure ahead.

TIME passed slowly as everyone monotonously followed the straight path, during which Louis, who headed up the rear, called out to Elias at the vanguard. "By the way, Elias, why don't we decide our party formation now? All the passages are tight and narrow, so we'd better decide where each member is going to stand before it becomes a free for all when we encounter monsters."

"Good idea. That will certainly make it easier to receive and give expedient support. In that case, I'll take up the vanguard as the close-range fighter, along with Mina who's an expert at detecting traps and monsters. I want our long-range fighter Aki and support magic user Louis to head up the rear."

"Okay!"

"Got it."

"All right!"

Mina, Louis, and Aki all agreed and rearranged their positions in line according to Elias's instructions before setting off down the stone path again.

How much longer did they have to go before the road forked or came to an end?

On and on they advanced, and still the straight path with what appeared endless pits on both sides continued. Seeing the same scenery going on forever gave the illusion they were looping back to their starting point. Since Elias, Mina, and Louis didn't indicate otherwise, they should be on the right path.

I'm starting to worry if I'll be able to fight properly as an Archer if we do encounter monsters. Actually, is it even possible to engage in battle without a bow and arrows? Realizing her lack of a weapon fairly late, Aki blanched and sped up to walk next to Louis.

"...Say, Louis? May I ask you a question?"

“Shoot.”

“...I became an Archer at the Adventurers’ Guild, but I never received the all-important bow and arrow. Will I be able to fight like this...?” she muttered feebly, her shoulders sagging forward.

Being placed in a proper job class was great, but Aki hadn’t received the critical weapon that would let her fulfill her role. Was she supposed to have picked it up before they left the guild house? Was she missing something vital here?

Speaking of battle, she hadn’t been in a monster encounter since the full Hero Party of Elias, Leo, and Johann took out monsters on the field, but even then she stood there with nothing to do as her high level party members wiped the plains with their enemies. That was exactly why she wanted to support her current party with a weapon in hand...

Shouldn’t I have stopped by the weapon shop to purchase a basic bow and arrow set? She anxiously shot Louis a sidelong glance as they trudged forward. He stopped dead in his tracks as if she had asked the most ridiculous question to date.

“Louis, why did you suddenly sto—”

“...Aki, is it possible that you don’t know about the special trait associated with the weapon used by the Hero’s Right-hand?”

“What trait?” She stopped walking and tilted her head at his leading question.

What possible trait could her weapon have? Had Leo mentioned anything about it? She didn’t remember him saying anything along those lines.

Since she said nothing, Louis pointed to her chest pocket. “That pen of yours was summoned by a Mage as the Right-hand’s specialized weapon, right? Take it into your hand and command it to become your bow and arrow.”

Command it? Aki raised a skeptical eyebrow, to which Louis chuckled and urged, “Just give it a try.”

Don’t knock it till you try it, Aki told herself as she laid the pen in her left palm and covered it with her right hand while internally commanding it to transform into a bow and arrow. The steel pen instantly lit up between her hands, shooting a silver light throughout the ruins.

Taking that as a signal, the outer surface of the steel pen began to elongate vertically as if the steel was melted by heat. Eventually it stretched to match Aki’s height.

“Wh-Whoa! What is it doing?!”

Grasping the gradually transforming pen in her hand, she watched as it turned into a stunningly shaped bow like a tree growing its branches at rapid speed.

Before she could get over her shock, she suddenly felt something weigh on her shoulder and found a quiver hanging from her back by a leather belt. Apparently the pen had manifested not only a bow, but a quiver stocked with arrows.

“I-Incredible!” Aki’s eyes sparkled with excitement as she held up the giant bow.

Is this also the Goddess’s power? Moved beyond words, she clutched the bow in both hands and grinned.

Louis watched her with a satisfied smile. “I thought so. The lore I’ve studied said that the weapon summoned for the Right-hand can transform freely based on the Right-hand’s wishes. Since you took on the Archer class, your specialized weapon, the pen, transformed into a bow and quiver to fit.” He examined the armaments she had successfully summoned. “Still, I must say that is one magnificent bow and quiver. The shape is beautiful. Just by looking at it I can tell the Mage who summoned it for you must be a master of his class.”

Delighted to hear him praising Leo’s handiwork, Aki nodded over and over. She thought of the moment when Leo adeptly activated the summoning spell while forming a complex, multitier magic circle under her feet.

Leo really is a genius Mage after all!

His status as a genius wasn’t just self-alleged boasting, but fact. She couldn’t wait to get back to the inn and show off the magnificent bow and arrow his summoned weapon had transformed into.

Surely he’d flash that boyish grin of his and say, “You’d better master it!”

I want to show it to Leo soon, Aki mused, when Mina skipped over to them after witnessing her little light show.

“Amazing! Your bow and quiver are as beautiful as jewels found in a dungeon treasure chest!” Mina effused while she assessed the weapons in a way only a thief could. “If I have my lore down right, you should be able to master your weapon without leveling up first. I read somewhere that the Right-hand’s weapon will act on its own to defeat monsters without you needing to do anything. Maybe it’s a case of the weapon having its own will to fight?”

“Wait, is that true?” Latching on to what sounded like very good news for her, Aki took a step closer to Mina.

Elias leisurely walked toward them and filled in the rest of the explanation. “Put in layman’s terms, your weapon comes equipped with an auto battle function. You don’t have to have any experience using a bow and arrow, because the bow will auto-target monsters for you. With just a little experience, you will be able to fight on par with high level Archers.”

Such tremendous power dwells in this bow? I’m extremely grateful for

that extra function, especially because I have no experience fighting monsters, but I feel sort of guilty obtaining power that surpasses those who have worked hard to reach this level... Unable to fully rejoice over her newfound power, Aki guiltily cast down her gaze.

Louis softly chuckled. "You really are a good girl down to the bone, huh? Well, I wouldn't let it get to you too much. People who come from other worlds aren't used to fighting monsters and have a much higher risk of dying in battle. The Goddess grants them special powers to support them. As the Hero's Right-hand, you deserve a handicap to ease you into this world."

"Thank you." Aki returned his gentle smile.

Put another way, the pen was granting her a special advantage so that she wouldn't drag down the rest of the Hero Party with her low level. In which case, she'd make full use of her bow and serve her party well.

Aki pressed her forehead against the bow's riser to impart her gratitude. "I hope you will take good care of this inexperienced Archer."

Please lend me your power so that I may grow, she prayed to the bow, which let out a silver flash in response.

It kinda feels like its greeting me back! Aki squeezed the center riser as if exchanging a handshake with it and happily smiled at her new partner.

With her weapon problems handled, the party progressed a little farther down the one-way path, when the notebook suddenly vibrated several times inside her pocket. Whenever the notebook had vibrated before, it meant that monsters were near.

"Everyone, stop where you are!" Aki sharply called out to Elias and Mina at the vanguard and whipped out her notebook. She held it on her palm and the pages flipped of their own accord.

She focused on the open page in the dark and saw multiple red dots approaching their location from the front. Aki narrowed her eyes and looked at the rest of her party members. "Monsters are fast approaching! There are one, two...ten coming from up ahead!"

Around ten red dots struggled down the narrow path on the map. They had encountered quite a large patrol.

Elias drew his sword with practiced ease and set his sights on the path where the monsters were going to come from. "Ten, huh? Quite the number. But it's no problem for us."

Mina deftly whipped out the dagger hanging from the belt at her back and gave a little jump for joy when she saw Elias brandishing the Holy Sword. "Hey, you're pretty cool there, Elias! There's nothing more exciting than fighting alongside the legendary Hero! I'll try not to slow you down."

“Don’t be so modest, Mina. Aren’t you a fairly high level yourself?” Elias remarked, not taking his eyes off the path ahead.

Mina’s lips curled into a grin with her eyes set on the same spot. “Tehehe, you could say that! I’m strong enough to join the Hero Party, you know? Doesn’t that go for you too, Louis?”

“Indeed. I’ll have to show you that my skills on the battlefield are as masterful as my music.”

“...Hey now, don’t go shrewdly advertising your music right now!” Mina promptly cut down Louis’s boasting.

Both of them seem calm.

Seeing as neither of them lost their cool with the knowledge of a small army of monsters coming their way, they must have plenty of battle experience. Leo and Johann weren’t around this time, but Aki had faith it would be okay with Louis and Mina there. Their bravery emboldened her.

Manifesting her bow and arrow, she looked to Elias to find he wore the same expressionless mask he had during the field battle. His calmness like the calm before the storm imparted just how amazing he truly was.

Okay, I’m not going to get in anyone’s way this time! Please lend me your strength. Scolding her nervously shaking arms into action, she aimed her bow in front of her.

During the last battle she was so afraid she had to be saved by Elias instead of being helpful. But she had the power to fight this time. She was going to use it to fight monsters and be of use to her party, even if just a little.

Monsters staggered closer from the shadows. Their footfalls carried a characteristic plip-plop sound. Gradually, they neared, and Aki’s breath caught in her throat when their grotesque forms appeared.

The monsters were humanoids that walked on two legs. Gills flapped on both sides of their faces, scales covered their blue skin, and they looked just like fish with legs and arms. In their slimy hands they brandished long harpoons in the shape of spears.

“Ick, mermen...” Mina grimaced at their disturbingly characteristic appearance.

The stench of mildew filled the narrow passage. Aki forced her arms to stop shaking and drew an arrow from the quiver on her back.

Calm down, Aki. It’s okay. You can do this. The weapon Leo summoned for you will become your strength. She took a deep breath and stared down the mermen with a sharp glint in her determined eyes.

Chapter 3: Crisis

“UGGH! I can’t stand mermen! There’s something super disgusting about fish heads running around on human torsos...” Mina blanched.

Aki nodded along with her appraisal, cold sweat beading her hands and making the bow slick in her grip. *Th-They really are repulsive...* Not only did the mermen shuffling closer have grotesque appearances, but they exuded the nostril burning stench of rotting fish. *Nngh, my nose!* She shoved her nose into her arm.

Elias gave his sword a practice swing and positioned himself to fight the incoming mermen, his eyes narrowing on them. With his attention locked on their enemies, he shot a brief glance over his shoulder at Mina, Aki, and Louis.

“I’ll cut a path through them. Can you keep a close eye on the battle and follow behind me once it’s clear?” Before he finished talking, Elias launched off his back foot to land the first strike. Only streaks of color from his golden hair and white coat remained as he propelled forward faster than a gust of wind.

Mina’s jaw dropped as he closed the distance with the mermen at a speed untraceable to the eye. “Wh-What’s with that inhuman speed?! His quick moves put the Thief class to shame!”

Louis let out an awed sigh and scratched the back of his head.

With everyone’s attention on his back, Elias brought the Holy Sword down on one of the mermen. The merman held its harpoon overhead to block, but it split right in half under the weight of the Holy Sword; the wooden scraps fell worthlessly to the ground. Elias’s blade didn’t stop there as it sliced diagonally from the merman’s shoulder to its waist in one clean sweep, rendering it in half.

The merman fell on one knee spraying black blood everywhere, uttering a gargled scream that echoed loudly through the stone passage. The next merman in line thrust its harpoon at Elias to take vengeance for its slain ally, but Elias spun out of the way and used the momentum to slam his foot into its torso. It slid across the ground, taking out two mermen directly behind it.

“Four down! Six to go!” Elias swept his sword to the side, shaking off the blood, crouched, and sprung at the next batch of enemies.

His overwhelming strength stole Aki, Mina, and Louis’s breath away; they even forgot they were in the middle of battle.

Elias is ridiculously strong! Aki sensed it during their first encounter on the field, but Elias’s strength was so overpowered it didn’t give his enemies the chance to strike. *I might not need to fight after all...*

Seeing Elias wipe the floor with the mermen in the blink of an eye had Mina jumping with excitement. “Nice! You’re getting my blood boiling! There’s no way we can lose with Elias on our side! So this is the strength of the world’s greatest champion—the Hero!” She nimbly threw her dagger up in the air and caught it in the reverse hand position. Amusement tugged the corners of her lips into a grin as she set her sights on the mermen. “But I’m not going to fall behind!”

Exhaling, Mina agilely launched herself into the fray with the light steps of a dancer and the speed of a street cat.

Mina is incredibly fast, too! She carried herself in a way that didn’t pale in comparison to Elias. *It’s so reassuring having her and Elias handle the frontlines!* Aki kept an eye on the remaining four monsters while being wowed by Elias and Mina’s perfect teamwork.

The Archer’s role was to support the vanguard from behind. Even if the close-range fighters were strong enough to hold the line on their own, the Archer had the important role of eliminating out of range monsters before they became a threat.

Telling herself that she had a role to play, Aki concentrated on the mermen at the back of the enemy formation. And then she saw it—one of the mermen drawing back its harpoon to throw it like a javelin at Elias. He was preoccupied with fighting two mermen at once, and had yet to notice the rear attack.

Nervous tension coursed through Aki’s blood. *I have to...I have to help him!* She shook out her trembling hands. She was going to save Elias with her own strength this time for sure. She was going to be of use to him as the Hero’s Right-hand, and not just a burden he had to save at every corner.

Please lend me your strength! Praying to her bow, Aki slipped an arrow from the quiver on her back and nocked it into place. She pulled back on the arrow until she could hear the tension in the bow. Her body instinctively knew how to use the bow and arrow as if she had years of marksman experience. The Goddess’s power was guiding her.

“Elias, duck!” she bellowed in warning as he continued slaying monsters in front of her.

Elias dove out of the way when he saw her taking aim. Confirming his location out of the corner of her eye, Aki locked onto the merman gunning for Elias and loosed the arrow without a second thought.

Hit home! Praying to the arrow that whistled through the passageway like a comet brought back the same pain she had felt at the entrance.

“Ouch...!”

This pain again?! Aki thrust her bow into the ground and leaned

against it as she rubbed at her stinging forehead with her right hand. *It hurts... But I can't faint like this!*

Clenching her teeth, she raised her gaze from the swaying floor just as the arrow shone with a black light and struck the merman like a bullet. It ripped off the merman's right arm, harpoon and all, and sent it catapulting backward. Without its right arm, the merman barely stopped itself from falling off the ledge into the abyss below by rolling onto its right knee.

Mina maneuvered to the back of the mermen and beheaded the one Aki weakened. She quickly moved back into position, avoiding the merman's death shriek and the geyser of black blood spewing from its neck.

Elias glanced over from his battle with another merman, a look of surprise over Aki's powerful arrow attack plain on his face. "You're awesome, Aki! You saved me there. Thank you!"

"N-No problem! I'm glad you're okay, Elias!" She returned his smile with sweat trickling down her face. She traced her forehead with her fingertips.

I don't feel the crest. What in the world was that just now? Thinking back on it, the arrow emitted that black light the second her forehead ached—the same black light that had dyed the ancient letters. *Is it connected somehow?*

There was something dreadful about possessing a mysterious power she knew nothing about.

Louis ran over to her from behind, his excitement palpable. "Aki, your arrows pack a serious punch. As a penetrating weapon, bows normally don't do enough damage to blow a monster's arm off with a single hit after crossing a long distance. Typically only ballista is capable of that, but your bow and arrow seem to inflict the same damage as a slash from a single-handed weapon. It momentarily looked like the bow turned into a ball of light—was that your magic?"

Aki shook her head at his volley of questions. "I don't really understand it myself... I felt that same pain in my forehead when I loosed the arrow. And the second I fought back against the pain, that black light consumed the arrow. Say, Louis, is there something wrong with my forehead?"

Did that crest leave a mark? Worried, Aki pushed her bangs up to show him.

He examined the area and inclined his head. "No, there's nothing there right now... A moon crest, huh? Since you can't seem to control it, I wonder if it's a latent power. And if it is, you may be unconsciously imbuing your attacks with it to strengthen them."

Aki cast down her gaze as Louis tried to work out the nature of her powers.

The moon crest was unquestionably related to what just happened, but she didn't know if it was a latent power. It may have been a special ability granted to her by the Goddess, but she had no way to confirm that theory.

"Hmm. I don't know anything for sure, but I don't see anything wrong with using the ability if the moon crest is giving me more strength... As it is, I'm constantly holding everyone back, so I want to be of some use during battle, no matter how small."

"I see... As your fellow party member, I'm glad to have your strength on our side, but you're borrowing from a mysterious crest that causes you pain. Whatever you do, don't overdo it. I'll look into the ancient records for you once this quest is over, so don't abuse it before then."

"Okay. Thanks, Louis." She raised her head with an encouraging smile, which Louis returned.

Obtaining some solid leads on the crest seemed likely with someone as knowledgeable as Louis on the case. No sooner did she think that, than the notebook in her suit pocket flickered on and off to warn of impending danger.

"Strange?"

Why is it reacting now? We're already fighting monsters—it can't be good if the notebook is trying to alert me about something else. Aki quickly pulled out the notebook and studied the page it automatically opened to.

The page displayed the layout of a single straight passageway: a map of their current location. Red dots marked the locations of the mermen fighting Elias up ahead, proving this was indeed a map of the area. Elias and Mina had been chiseling away the enemies, leaving only three red dots.

The notebook went out of its way just to tell me how many enemies are left? No, that can't be it, since I can tell the numbers just by looking.

Aki was straining her eyes to see the difference, when all of a sudden, ten red dots appeared behind their current location.

"No way!" Feeling the blood drain from her, she ascertained what the notebook showed with an ashen face.

Ten more enemies were fast approaching from the rear. Noticing Aki's sudden shift to look behind them, Louis followed suit and turned around.

"It's a trap! They're flanking us...!" He immediately brandished his gittern and Aki reached for an arrow in her quiver.

A new batch of harpoon carrying mermen closed in on the back entrance Aki's party had entered through. Realizing they had detected their stealth approach, the mermen switched tactics: they charged straight at them with their harpoons, their feet pounding the ground

to a drumlike beat.

They're fast!

"Aki! Louis!" Elias and Mina cried out in unison, their hands already tied up in battle.

The cries of her party members at her back, Aki wiped the icy sweat dripping down her cheek with the back of her hand. Avoiding battle before their close-range fighters returned was impossible with how fast the mermen approached. There wasn't any time to nock her arrow. At this point, she had to block their attacks with her bow alone and use it as a bludgeoning weapon if lucky.

The great genius mage Leo made this weapon for me—I'm sure he imbued it with the durability to handle close-range combat too!

"Of course I did, you dummy," she imagined him announcing with a boastful smile as she raised the steel bow over her head to swing down on her enemies like a hammer. *It's so light!*

Keeping an eye on Aki as she prepared to smack down mermen, Louis thrummed a ballad on his gittern. The notes activated his Lunar Magic spells.

Inhaling, he weaved the lyrics in a deep baritone that beautifully echoed through the stone chamber. "Halt. Where are you going in such a rush to a fault? Why not rest your weary feet for a spell? Don't you worry, all is well. We'll be waiting for you."

The Lunar Magic circle formed in the air and vanished. Slowing down monster movement was one of the support spells Minstrels excelled at. Louis's beautiful rendition wrapped around the mermen's feet, slowing their full-speed charge.

But the merman closest to Aki forced its sluggish legs forward and swung its harpoon toward her head!

"I-I'm not going to lose to the likes of you!" Aki held the bow horizontally over her head like a shield, and blocked the harpoon. The sound of steel colliding with steel reverberated in her ears and the vibrations caused her legs to slide apart into an awkward split. "Kya!"

Aki stumbled backward. She felt like she was falling in slow motion and, as she did, fearfully looked behind her to where a vast expanse of darkness belonging to the wide pits lining the passageway awaited. One misplaced step had sent her tumbling backward into the void.

"K-Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh!"

"Aki!" Louis reached out for her, and she tried to grab onto his hand, but their fingertips only brushed before they clasped empty air.

This might finally be it for me! Amid her despair she watched as Louis grew smaller with his hand held vainly over the gutter she had fallen into. And I thought I'd be able to fight alongside everyone now. That I'd be able to obtain the secret panacea from this quest and cure Arnie with

it. Nako, Leo, Johann, Mina, Louis, Elias—I'm so sorry!

Aki gave in to gravity's pull and was absorbed into the dark abyss as memories of everyone she cared about in this world swirled through her mind like a kaleidoscope.

"AKI! This can't be real...!" After watching the rearguard's crisis unfold from the vanguard, Elias bolted without a care for the enemy he was fighting straight to where he caught sight of Aki falling.

I can still reach her at this distance!

Elias slipped his hand into the back of his coat and drew the hidden knives fastened to his back. Pinching a knife between each finger, he flung them at the mermen surrounding Louis with the recoil of a large ballista held in hand. The knives pierced into the brows of multiple mermen, and Louis cleaned up the rest with a wide area Lunar Magic spell while they were staggered. Launching off an accurate wide-area magic spell in seconds spoke volumes about Louis's skill.

"Mina!" Elias looked over his shoulder as he ran to see Mina finish off the last of the mermen they had been fighting together.

"Yeah?"

"I'm diving into the gutter to save Aki, so take care of the rest!"

"Got it! Please save Aki!"

Mina's entreaty echoing far behind him, Elias raced over to the ledge Aki had fallen off and kicked off the ground to give his dive more momentum. Endless darkness stretched on within the massive abyss, giving the impression it was a bottomless pit.

"Aki! Where are you?!" Elias shouted as he plummeted. Then he saw it: the fluttering of his white cloak and Aki wrapped up in it. She seemed to be unconscious; she didn't respond to him.

Right, there's an enchantment attached to my cloak! I'm positive that enchantment is imbued with wind magic that allows the user to float. I can slow her descent with it. Lending Aki my cloak was the right choice after all! Not that I expected it to come in handy for something like this!

Magic enchantments on items or charms allowed someone without any magic like Elias to benefit from the spells held within. Only the owner tuned with the magic item was able to activate it. He stretched his hand toward the feather emblem attached to Aki's chest and quietly chanted the activation spell.

Instantly, the forest-green gem in the center of the feather glittered and faintly illuminated the dark gutter. The weak floating spell surrounded Aki's whole body and slowed the rate she was falling as if a gust of wind had welled up beneath her.

Perfect! Elias reached out for the slowly descending Aki, grabbed her arm, and pulled her into his chest. The magic item's floating spell spread to him, easing their descent to the bottom of the gutter as if they were a feather floating on the wind.

Just how deep does this pit go? I can't even see the bottom.

Elias guided the back of Aki's head against his shoulder. Her firmly shut eyes proved she had lost consciousness.

I don't know how far we'll fall, but I swear I'll protect you! He tightly held onto Aki's slender body and glared at the deep nothingness whisking past them.

At long last, a single beam of light cut through the darkness.

Chapter 4: All Alone in the World

“AKI!”

“Aki...!”

I hear someone calling my name. What happened to me? The last thing I remember is slipping off the ledge after blocking the merman’s attack—

“Aki, can you hear me? I’m begging you, please open your eyes!”

Someone shook Aki so hard it brought her hazy consciousness to the surface. Her eyes peeled open—Elias’s stunning green eyes were barely inches from her face. Shocked, she turned scarlet.

“Whoa! Elias?! What’s the matt—oh my gosh!”

“Aki! Praise the Goddess you’re all right!” Without giving her a chance to speak, Elias reached down to where she was lying with her head on his lap and scooped her into his arms in a tight embrace.

Not quite sure what was going on, she let him hug her, though she stiffened when she felt his bare, solid chest pressed against her cheek. His chiseled muscles lent a smooth, papery feel to his firm skin that reminded her just how much of a man he really was—

“Kyaaaaaaaah! Why aren’t you wearing any clothes, Elias?!” Freaked out by the fact he was shirtless, she screamed and shoved his chest away.

Not expecting that reaction, Elias fell onto his rear end and blankly stared down at his exposed upper body. “Huh? Oh...” He tripped over his words trying to find the right explanation.

Aki, on the other hand, had enough and raised her right hand as she trembled with anger that flushed her whole face. “...You... You...!”

“Aki?! Wait! It’s not what you thi—” Elias scooted back as fast as he could, but Aki’s raised palm came down hard on his right cheek.

“You PERVERT!”

“Ow!”

Aki’s satisfactory slap sent an explosive THWACK echoing off the walls. Tears formed in his eyes as he held a hand over his throbbing cheek and vigorously shook his head.

“I-It’s not what you think, Aki! You’ve misunderstood the situation on so many levels!”

“How am I wrong?! I don’t want to hear any excuses!”

“I’m not making excuses! Aki, can you take a good look at yourself first?”

“...Look at myself?” She looked down at her waterlogged clothes that had grown quite heavy.

Huh? Did I fall into water?

Elias watched as Aki took in her current state and gingerly explained the situation to her, hoping another slap wasn't in store for him. "...You see, after you fell off the ledge into the abyss below, I dove in after you. We fell into this underground waterway and both ended up drenched... And since I didn't want to touch your clothes without permission, I stripped off my coat and shirt and tried to help keep your temperature up. I promise I wasn't trying to do anything ungentlemanly," he quickly rushed out to defend himself.

If Elias dove into the gutter and stripped to save me, then didn't I just return the favor with spite?

Realizing the horrible mistreatment of her savior, Aki brought her head to the floor and earnestly apologized. "Elias, I'm so sorry! I completely had the wrong idea!"

"D-Don't worry about it. I'm partially at fault for, you know, suddenly embracing you without a top on. That was a...rude thing to do to a lady..." Elias imitated Aki and bowed his head close to the ground.

She waved both hands in front of her face in panicked embarrassment. "Uh, um, er, well, there's nothing for you to apologize for, Elias! I'm completely at fault here..."

"N-No, no, I'm the one at fault!"

They kept continuously bowing to each other that they both began to question what in the world they were doing. Aki giggled over their similar reaction, and Elias quickly averted his eyes from her.

"Elias? What's wrong?"

"...U-Uh, your clothes have been...wet for a while now, and transparent..." Elias fumbled over his words and pressed his forehead against the ground so as not to look at her.

"Hm?"

His earlobes were awfully red.

My clothes are transparent? That can't be... Aki jerked her head down to get a good look at her top. Lo and behold, her soaked blouse clung to her lithe frame, revealing her lacy pink bra. She yanked her suit jacket shut to conceal her blouse. She couldn't bear exposing her immodest appearance in front of any man, especially one she had feelings for.

Flustered out of her mind, her right hand shot back into the air for another attack. "N-Nooooooooooooo! Stupid, Elias! You perrrrvvv!"

"Hah? Wai—Aki—don't!"

Elias couldn't defend against her right hand in time as it whooshed through the air with all the speed of a professional baseball player's swing and crisply smacked his cheek. The dank cavern filled with the dry THWACK and Elias's wordless yelp.

Trembling with her face bright red, and tears in her eyes, Aki

hugged herself. "Jerk! Meanie! Please pretend you never saw anything! It's too shameful!"

Despite pressing a hand against his stinging cheek, Elias smiled softly at the woman before him. "There's nothing shameful about you. You're very beautiful, Aki."

"Th-That's the type of thing you're not supposed to say right now!"

Why did Elias always have to throw her curveball compliments at the oddest of times? His ingrained kindness likely had a way of inviting misunderstandings from the women he dealt with.

Aki exhaled to put a stop to her racing heart, while Elias pulled a blanket from his things and tossed it over her head.

"Wah! What's this?"

"I wanted to give you that blanket once you woke up. You'll catch a cold if you continue to wear sopping-wet clothes. Wipe yourself down with that. I promise I absolutely won't look, so I suggest you take off your clothes and squeeze out as much water as you can."

Aki poked her face over the blanket and saw Elias's tranquil smile. She pulled the blanket around her shoulders and gave a tiny nod. Here she was losing her head again, and he still only showed concern and consideration for her. Taking a good moment to think about it, she realized he had saved her from plummeting to her death and woke her up before she froze.

Elias is always right there when I need him... And how do I repay him? By misunderstanding, calling him a pervert, and hitting him. Ugh, I have to apologize.

She swallowed her nervousness, leaned forward on her knees, and grabbed Elias's arm while he sat on the ground fishing through his bags with his back to her.

"Thank you, Elias. Um, I'm sorry for slapping you...twice," she mumbled.

Getting two good full-hand slaps in on the legendary hero's smooth cheek was quite the unthinkable deed on her part. She could just imagine the ballads the minstrels would weave if they knew.

Elias ruffled her hair with a sweet smile. "I know. I'm over it. After all, I shouldn't have rudely stared. Though my cheek still stings worse than my training days with the sword masters."

"I said I'm sorry! You sure do love to tease me, don't you?" She puffed out her cheeks and pretended to pout. He let out an amused chuckle. He was getting back at her with his teasing.

Then he suddenly stopped laughing and gazed into her eyes. He wrapped an arm around her back and pulled her close. "You don't know how relieved I am to see you safe. I was honestly on the brink of

losing it when I saw you fall off the ledge. I was scared to death thinking I might have lost you for good...”

“Elias...” Aki quietly lent an ear to his soft voice whispering beside her.

The waterway where they were now was more like an underground cavern than an ancient ruin, and the darkness and humidity chilled the air. But just cuddling together warmed her body and soul.

ELIAS hugged Aki as he falteringly shared the feelings he had locked up inside. “...Aki, as the Hero, I’m not supposed to get very attached...to people or things. I was born to protect the world, not someone special to me. After all, if I develop a relationship with someone dear to me, and the day comes that I have to choose between that person or the world, I’ll have to put the world first...as its hero. So I swore to myself that I would be alone forever—that I’d fight all by myself. But...” He squeezed her shoulder.

Perhaps he shouldn’t say what weighed heavily on his heart. Perhaps these were the words he should keep locked up, never to see the light of day. But touching her, feeling her so close beside him, ignited his feelings of love and adoration so much they exploded from the box he kept locked tight. These feelings were as strong as his fear of losing her, as his loss and confusion over doing the right thing.

Elias pressed his forehead against Aki’s, hoarsely squeezing out, “...But I...you...”

Never before had he so strongly felt being the hero was such an isolating, lonely job. The hero was loved by everyone as their champion, their savior. However, there wasn’t a single person who tried to know him, who connected with him as an individual, on an emotional level. In the end, it was no different from being loved by no one at all.

The hero was to love no one and be loved by no one—that’s not true love. Then what exactly was he fighting to protect? The world? Was the world going to shower him with love? To listen to his woes and comfort him? Return his affections?

The Hero is a loner in all respects... Elias shook his head once he reached that conclusion. *That’s right. I had decided to bury every emotion behind a smile in order to prevent myself and those around me from getting hurt. Conveying my feelings to Aki is forbidden...*

Elias slowly pulled away from Aki. “I-I’m sorry, Aki. I...was about to say something I’m...not supposed to. So, please forget what just—”

Forcing his practiced smile into place, Elias held up his hand in an attempt to halt his true feelings from escaping. Aki gingerly seized that hand, leaned forward, and pressed her lips against his. Her sweet, feminine fragrance tickled his nose, and the feel of her plump lips flush against his took Elias's breath away. Turning redder than a tomato, his very first kiss rooted him to the ground.

Equally as red, Aki didn't avert her eyes, but looked him square in the face. "Elias! Um, you know...!"

Dumbfounded, Elias pulled himself together and sat up straighter than the Holy Sword. "Y-Yes, m'lady?!" he croaked, becoming oddly formal in his word choice.

Aki balled her hands into tight little fists, emboldening herself for what she had to say next. "Me too! I-I...love you too, Elias!"

"...Erp?" he uttered the most dumbfounded sound yet.

Aki...loves me, too?

"I kept telling myself that having someone like me fall in love with you would only be a burden because you're the Hero—because you're so kind, Elias. So I promised myself I'd never give voice to these feelings, and in return, I'd settle on becoming your greatest pillar of support who's always by your side...." Tears rolled down Aki's cheeks as she spoke. "I-I'm sorry! I'm just so stupidly happy! I thought I'd never be able to say this to you... Just telling you is enough—"

Elias couldn't stand watching her bashfully laugh with her face soaked in the tears she cried for him—he grabbed her arm and pulled her close.

I'm unsure if this is the right thing to do. I'm unsure, but isn't it all right in this one moment for me to set aside my role as hero and convey my feelings to her as just another man?

Elias obeyed the feelings exploding inside him and brought his lips to her ear, "...I love you, too," he whispered. He felt her tremble in his arms. He wrapped his arms securely around her, conveying the overflowing love he felt for her with his whole body. "I love you too, Aki. My heart has belonged to you ever since the moment you encouraged me in the castle."

He admired her from the very beginning and found himself helplessly pining after her. Just as she had shared with him, he had locked away his feelings, believing they were forbidden and a burden he shouldn't bring upon her.

Perhaps telling her how he felt was truly the wrong thing to do. Maybe he was doing the irrevocable. Even so, he was thrilled his feelings for her were mutual, and he was happier than he had ever been. So filled with joy was he that, for the first time in his life, he was glad he was born and alive.

How can I be this ridiculously happy when I set out on this journey to fight alone by abandoning everything that could possibly bring me joy? She saved me from the mindset I had used as an excuse to hide in my shell. She became a true pillar of support, just like her title as the Hero's Right-hand designates.

The truth was that there was no rule out there that stated the Hero couldn't have relationships and find someone dear to them. Until now, Elias's lack of faith in himself led him to fear he'd hurt those he cared about and himself as a result.

Since there's nothing to stop us, I just have to become strong enough to protect her and the world at large. After all, I am the Hero.

"Aki, listen..."

The couple cuddled up so close together they feared they might hear each other's galloping heartbeats. When Aki endearingly gazed up at him to continue, Elias showered an unadorned smile on her.

"Thank you for loving me. Thanks to you, I'm able to believe I'm not all alone in this world after all."

Because the woman I love more than anyone else needs and wants me.

Elias gently took Aki's hand. "I promise I'll become a Hero amazing enough to protect both you and this world, so...please be with me forever."

Her big eyes opened wide, and teardrops overflowed from them. "I'm also incredibly glad I met you in this world! Elias, I love you so much! Please be with me forever, too!"

"I will." He placed both hands on her cheeks to wipe away her tears, and inclined his head closer.



They closed their eyes and tasted their burning passion for each other through their gently touching lips, expressing how deeply they loved one another through their bodies.

After a long moment, they pulled away and gazed lovingly into each other's eyes as they pressed their foreheads together and shared a blissful laugh.

I'm no longer all alone in the world.

Chapter 5: I Became the Girlfriend of a Hero!

ELIAS procured a small bottle of whale oil from the leather bag he had set aside. He dripped the oil into a small dish he had laid out and immersed a dry thread in it. Then he pulled a small metal board from the bag and laid it flat on the ground. The surface of the board was engraved with a magic circle that activated fire-based Lunar Magic—another one of his handy magic charms.

He picked up the oil-soaked thread and placed it on top of the board. The magic circle sparked red and an open-air fire erupted from the board.

“Great! I lit it on my first try!”

Pretty skilled of me, if I do say so myself!

Reveling in his awesome fire-starting skills, Elias stared at the swaying flames on top of the board as he became lost in thought. His mind filled with the memory of touching Aki only minutes prior. He had embraced her slender body, told her he loved her, and then stole her lips—

“Hey, Elias?”

“UWAH?! Y-Yes, m’lady?!” Red from head to toe from having the woman whose kiss he was reliving call out to him in that exact moment, Elias awkwardly turned toward her.

After their sweet moment together, he had asked her to dry off and squeeze the excess water weighing down her clothes behind a large boulder, so he assumed she had just returned from doing that, but...the second he saw what she was—or rather wasn’t—wearing, he accidentally let the bottle of whale oil slip from his hand onto the hard ground. He paid no heed to the small bottle rolling away as his eyes fixed on the woman sashaying toward him.

“Aki...why are you dressed like that...?” he croaked. That was about all he could manage to say.

Aki had wrapped the large white blanket around her body like a strapless dress, exposing her bare legs and shoulders. Were her clothes too wet to put back on? In her hands she carried her neatly folded suit.

Elias froze without breathing, his full attention held captive by her elegant curves and lithe frame.

This outfit is extremely over stimulating for me right now!

Whether she realized what he was thinking or not, Aki padded over to him with her bare feet and apologetically dipped her head. “I-I’m sorry for the unseemly display... I tried slipping my wet clothes back on, but it was too cold and sticky...” She fidgeted and restlessly darted her eyes around the underground cavern.

Elias struggled to make eye contact with her as well, bending over to pick up the fallen bottle as an excuse to look away. He couldn't help thinking about the sweet moment he had confessed his feelings to her and that only added to his embarrassment.

After all, the woman who had been a dear party member to him transformed into a very special person in his life the moment he had laid his affections bare. That mysterious and giddy change left him confused over how to interact with her now.

He stole a peek at her as she stood there fidgeting, revealing the luscious curves of her feminine physique. Perverted reasons aside, he honestly thought she was gorgeous. She was just so incredibly attractive he wished she wouldn't show this side of herself to anyone else.

Going along with that impulse, Elias hovered slightly off his perch on the ground and pulled Aki to him by the wrist.

"Whoa! Elias, what's—"

"D-Don't let anyone else..." Kneeling, he squeezed Aki to his chest when she fell toward him, and mustered his courage to whisper huskily in her ear, "...Please don't let anyone else but me see you dressed like that..."

So embarrassing! He was the one who whispered those words, but he was so embarrassed his voice quivered. But he wanted her, the woman who made him feel alive with love, to know that he didn't want her showing off her feminine beauty in front of other men.

Because...Aki is my girl now.

Never harboring any affection or attachment to anything in his life before left Elias baffled over his own possessiveness. He didn't know how to handle these new and foreign feelings.

He didn't want his feelings to limit her freedom, bother her, or hurt her in any way. Essentially, he didn't want her to hate him for it.

That said, he also wanted her to only see him, to be his and his alone if she'd allow it. ...*Is this what it means to be selfish?*

What did it mean to be selfish? Living as the selfless hero gave him no experience with such emotions and concepts. Experiencing these feelings for the first time made it hard to know how to control and regulate them. Did loving someone always involve such strong and powerful emotions?

He could hear Aki's racing heartbeat as she let him hug her close. Both of them were aware of the other as someone they were romantically interested in and felt nervous for it.

Taking what he said at face value, Aki lifted her big, round eyes to meet his and gave a small nod. "S-Sorry, Elias. I won't—"

Elias pressed his lips a tad forcefully against hers, swallowing the rest of what she had to say. Her eyes widened to the size of the full

moon. He placed his head on her shoulder.

“...I’m the one who’s sorry, Aki. I think...I’m so madly in love with you that I’m not sure what to do with myself or these feelings...” he honestly spilled his guts.

He wanted her all to himself but didn’t want to smother her with his love till she came to despise him. So the question was: just how much should he ask of her? The answer eluded him as it was his first time experiencing love. At his wits’ end, he stared at her and she responded by laughing out loud.

“Uh? Why are you laughing, Aki?”

Had he asked something worthy of being laughed at? Did he make a foolish mistake along the way?

Aki laughed even more when he stared blankly at her and reached out to pat him on the head as if comforting a child.

“Elias, it’s the same for me. I’ve had these feelings bottled up for you for so long that now that our feelings are mutual, I’m so nervous I’m not sure how to behave... You see, I forced myself to believe that you were forever out of my reach because you’re the Hero, the legendary champion admired by all. I’m just thrilled beyond words that we can be this close now!” She rubbed her cheek lovingly against his and smiled blissfully.

Her adorable gesture drew a full smile from him. “I see. Aki, I love you.”

“I-I love you too! You really are so handsome and cool, Elias, I still can’t believe that you’re my boy...boyfriend now.” Aki studied his Adonic face before bashfully averting her eyes.

He watched her and chuckled. “I feel the same way about you.”

It’s like a dream to learn the woman I’ve been pining after all this time feels the same way about me, and has become my girlfriend! After all, I thought I’d walk the road of life all alone.

Aki fidgeted shyly as she watched the fire sway in front of them. Elias loosened his hold on her and directed his attention toward the dancing flames as well.

He was ecstatic they had come to the point in their relationship where they felt the same about each other, but he felt equally anxious. Perhaps he should consult her about his peculiar circumstances before things went too far. She deserved to know, even if it led to her hating him.

Elias pulled himself together, pressed his forehead against Aki’s back, dropped his gaze to the ground, and muttered, “...Aki? I’m scared. Is it truly all right for me to be in a relationship with you? I’m, well, an artificial life created by the Goddess—I’m not even sure if you can consider me human. Not to mention, there’s no guarantee what will happen to this life of mine at the end of the battle with the Dark

Lord. Plus, you and I are literally from different worlds. When I start to think about all those things, I start to grow more and more afraid and anxious that I won't be able to make you happy."

I love Aki more than anyone else, but there are so many obstacles we must overcome to be together, I worry about the suffering she'll go through to be with me. There are so many indefinite factors like will we always be able to stay together in the future?

After maintaining her silence for a few long moments, Aki gingerly pulled away from Elias, then slapped both hands lightly against his cheeks. A dry thwack echoed through the cavern, leaving Elias more confused than ever by her actions.

"O-Ow! What was that for—"

"Listen up, buster!" She looked up at him imploringly. "It's important to think about the future, but if that's all you think about, you'll end up overlooking and losing out on what's important in the present. I love you, you love me, and we both want to be together. So we need to put those feelings first and foremost. Any obstacles we come across while we're together can be tackled by us as a couple! We're the best possible partner for each other, and don't you forget it! Okay?" Aki held up her fists and flashed a winning grin.

Elias stared back at her with his mouth slightly ajar before letting a smile replace his stern expression. He nodded deeply in agreement with her.

Aki always helps me when I'm at my most pathetic... She encourages and comforts me every step of the way. I'm positive having her by my side will keep me as a hero who never takes the wrong path. She makes me believe I can become strong enough not to lose to anyone. I'm so glad I met Aki.

Was the Hero's Right-hand chosen based on them possessing personality traits the Hero lacked? Did Aki's presence in his life help solidify his resolve to fulfill his duty as the world's hero? The Goddess seemed to have picked the perfect partners from another world to motivate her creations.

Aki hopped to her feet, turned her back to Elias, sat down between his knees, and leaned her back against his chest. "Hehehe! So warm!" she giggled with absolute satisfaction.

Elias wrapped his arms around her and clasped his hands in front of her, then rested his head on the back of her shoulder. "You seem to be enjoying yourself, Aki."

"I sure am! I'm just so happy. On that note, what should we do next, Elias? We fell off course because I literally fell, right?" Aki hung her head and glanced at Elias's handsome side profile resting on her shoulder.

He lightly shook his head and pulled the map Mina had drawn

for him out of a nearby bag. Then he put his hands back around her waist and spread out the map on her lap so she could see it too.

“That’s not necessarily true. This is likely the straight path Mina and Louis are taking, and since we fell straight down from there, I’d say this is where we are now,” Elias tapped the spot with his finger. “I believe we just have to head north from here without thinking about it too much. Knowing Mina and Louis, they’ll continue forward, trusting in our ability to find our way there. So if we head toward our final destination, we should bump into them on the way.”

Skilled adventurers that they were, they wouldn’t waste time trying to find a path into the gutter or return to the entrance. In all likelihood, they were pushing ahead with the objective of meeting up at their final destination.

Both Mina and Louis had said they spent the majority of their time solo leveling, so they were more than capable of advancing into a dungeon after getting separated from their party members.

Aki nodded thoughtfully along with Elias’s plan. “I see. So basically, we just have to take the underground route to our destination because Louis and Mina will be headed there on the main route.”

“That’s right. Our party got separated, but both pairs are high enough level to advance inside without much issue. We should avoid monsters as much as we can to save our strength while progressing deeper into the dungeon.”

Mina and Louis should have been cutting a path to the quest destination all this time, so Elias and Aki had no time to waste in catching up to them. Passing each other along the way would only drag things out even more.

“All right, shall we get going soon? Are you warmed up now, Aki?” Elias worriedly asked from behind her.

Aki smiled brighter than the sun and sprung to her feet. “Yep! I’m warmed up both in body and soul! Well, it’s kind of weird to say this now, but I’m looking forward to our future together as boyfriend and girlfriend!” Flushing, she bowed her head to him.

Somehow standing close and gazing into each other’s eyes added a realness to their new relationship.

Aki is my girlfriend, and I’m Aki’s boyfriend. He was only repeating what was now a fact, but the giddiness didn’t seem like it was going to fade any time soon.

He put his right hand on her cheek and gently lifted her chin. “I’m also looking forward to our future together.”

I promise I’ll make you happy.

She closed her eyes and Elias gently kissed her lips, believing in their blissful future together.

Chapter 6: A Friend to the Rescue

“**LAST** one! Eat this, fish face!” Mina leapt nimbly into the air and slit the throat of the final merman in a single swipe as she landed behind the beast.

Slowed by Louis’s spell, the merman could do nothing as its head was severed, collapsing in the fountain of blood gushing from its neck.

Mina glanced over the small cuts covering her body, shook the blood off her knife, and sheathed it at her waist behind her back. “Phew... Looks like we managed to clean them all up.”

They had sustained some minor wounds, but both Louis and Mina had ample Adventurer experience that helped them wipe out dozens of mermen without suffering serious injury. Taking on that many enemies with just a Minstrel and a Thief, and no Tank or Warrior, was a remarkable feat.

Hard to rejoice though... Mina sprinted over to the ledge and peered carefully down the gutter. A black hole extended from the bridge-like path she stood on to the opposite stone wall. Icy, damp air blew up from the endless expanse of darkness below. The lower dungeon levels dropped in temperature by a good ten degrees. Letting out a heavy sigh, she frowned. *I can only hope both Elias and Aki are okay.*

It’s my fault they even got caught up in all this. And with Aki just becoming an Adventurer, and this being her first real Quest, she only has limited battle experience. How could I let her first time be such a scary experience? She had to fend off an ambush in such narrow confines, what a prime example of an unprepared party!

Mina pressed her lips together so hard they turned white. She loved the thrill of tackling a challenge alone, and soloing quests tended to be way more effective, so she didn’t join parties unless the Quest absolutely required it. Aki was her first female Adventurer friend, and she put her in harm’s way right out the gate.

I wanted to become good friends with Aki and experience the joy of questing together... Tormented by her lack of power, Mina raked her fingers irritably through her bangs. She had to become stronger. Strong enough to protect not only herself but her party members, too. *...I’m completely useless like this... I can’t believe I couldn’t even protect one friend.*

Louis strapped his gittern to his back and stepped up to Mina with an understanding smile as she stared down the hole, torturing herself with regrets. “Mina, I understand how you feel, but Aki has the Hero Elias with her. The world’s greatest champion is protecting her—there’s no way they aren’t okay. You have nothing to worry about.”

“...Yeah, I know,” she mumbled, though agreeing with him aloud did nothing to suppress her worries.

Louis caught sight of her clenching her fist in front of her chest and debated on how to set her mind at ease. He eventually went with a light pat on her back. “I know I don’t have to say this to someone at your level, but the path we’re on is narrow and only goes in two directions. We may not stand a chance against more patrols if they flank us again. We need to get moving now.”

“You don’t have to tell me that,” she sniped a little standoffishly, finding him annoying.

He shrugged. “For someone who looks indifferent to the world, you’re fairly stubborn. I’m all for strong women, but I’m not into pessimistic ladies who are forever paralyzed by their regrets.”

“Whatever!” Mina glowered at him. “It’s not like I care about your type! Why would you bring that up now?” she huffed and gave his chest a light shove.

A gentle smile spread across Louis’s face. He hadn’t expected her to react that way. “...Good. You’ve returned to your usual self.”

“Huh...?” She gaped at him.

Louis’s pretty lips curled into a smile that lit up his whole face. “You aren’t the indecisive type. We’ll probably meet up with them if we keep pressing forward, right? It’s unlike you not to come to that conclusion first. Aren’t you more likely to optimistically push ahead with the hopes of seeing them again?”

His cute little head tilt sent the blood rushing to her cheeks.

Sheesh. I seriously wish the guy who’s always clowning around wouldn’t suddenly be nice when it counts! A nobleman like Louis would never give a commoner like me the time of day... Yet he has to go and encourage me when I’m at my weakest. I’m going to misunderstand his intentions at this rate. I’ll start thinking he’s a bit interested in me too.

Mina purposefully sighed and averted her gaze from Louis, stopping her thoughts from wandering down that path.

“D-Don’t be dumb. I’m no different from...usual!”

He chuckled as though he saw right through her. “Are you now? Then I just misinterpreted it as you being all glum.”

“Wha—”

She was going to say: *What made you think a thing like that?* But Louis held up his index finger, cutting her off.

“Even I can tell how much you care for Aki and Elias. Normal Adventurers like us teaming up with the legendary Hero and his Right-hand has to either be the work of the Goddess or some kind of fate,” he said slowly, each of his words measured with the weight of what he was saying. “So let’s do everything in our power to protect them. What’s resting on their backs—the fate of the world—is too big

for anyone to shoulder alone.”

Mina gave a big nod.

I'm lacking in power, but I want to be the first ally who comes running to their aid when they need it. I'll become strong enough to bear that heavy burden along with them, because they are my precious friends!

Louis placed an encouraging hand on her head. She batted it away to hide her embarrassment, when all of a sudden, his playful expression froze on his pallid face.

“Louis? What’s wrong?” She looked questioningly at him.

Without a word, his gaze anchored on the path ahead. “We’re too late. Mina, a new batch of enemies has arrived.”

“No way...”

Following his lead, she directed her gaze down the straight path to where ten more mermen shuffled closer like sharks circling their prey. Chatting for a long time in the same place turned them into an easy target.

It's all my fault! A pit formed in her stomach and a small cry escaped the back of her throat. Cold sweat trickled down her cheek.

“Louis, I’m so sorry! This is my fault!” Not taking her regret-stricken eyes off the enemy, she gripped Louis’s sleeve.

In their top condition, she and Louis could’ve taken care of ten mermen on their own. But they had suffered numerous injuries and battle fatigue from the last fight. With no Priest around to use Recovery spells on them, they couldn’t heal up.

Was it possible for them to take on that many mermen without Elias and Aki around?

Mina swiftly drew her knife from its sheath at her back and held it in front of her. The sweat covering her hands forced her to readjust her grip or risk the knife slipping.

What can we do? How do we cut our way through?

“Mina.” A single drop of sweat fell from Louis’s forehead. He kept his gaze on the mermen, not once glancing her way. He quietly continued, “I’ll stop them with my Lunar Magic. Take that time to turn back down the path we came and run—”

“N-No way am I gonna do that!” Mina shouted, shaking her head so hard her hair whipped her face. “Like hell am I gonna leave you behind and run away! Don’t say something so ridiculous!” Being stricken by overwhelming passion choked her up.

She couldn’t leave her friends behind to save herself. She couldn’t leave Louis—he was an important friend to her too.

No, that's not all he is to me... I'm gradually starting to harbor feelings for him, ones that go beyond friendship. I'm drawn to his openness and calming disposition. It's kind of sad really, considering I always thought I'd want nothing to do with an eccentric guy like him.

Mina tightened her grip on the knife as she came to terms with the situation. Being wishy-washy with her feelings was the reason they ended up in this mess. Louis predicted this would happen, which was why he had recommended they keep moving before more monsters showed up.

So I'm going to... She bent her knees and assumed a close-combat stance. She fixed her eyes on the nearest group of monsters, baiting them to attack her. *Protect Louis, myself, and everything important to me!*

"Louis!" She glanced up at him and held his gaze. "I'm going to fight as long as we stand a chance! Please fight with me!"

Neither should have to become bait for the other to escape. They couldn't lose or die here. After all, they were the esteemed Hero Elias's party members!

Mina exhaled, then launched off the ground toward the mermen.

"Get down!" came a sharp man's voice that thundered off the stone walls.

"What?!" Befuddled by that commanding voice, she tried to turn around, but was forcefully pulled to the ground by Louis.

A fraction of a second later, light from a powerful Lunar spell exploded from the direction of the man's voice. The bright light was blinding. The amount of light emitted by a Lunar Magic spell increased with its difficulty level, and the more powerful the spell, the greater the light it emitted. Which meant—that *blinding light is coming from a high-tier spell!*

Protected underneath Louis, Mina lifted her head from the ground and strained her eyes to see the source of light. In the center of the torrent of light that was so dazzling it couldn't be looked at directly, an unfamiliar man with black hair held his hands out in front of him. He was drawing complex magic circles with flawless execution.

"O comets that illuminate the darkness, slam down relentlessly!"

Mina heard Louis gasp above her when he heard the man chant that spell. "I don't believe it... the most powerful spell...? Only a handful of people in the whole world can use that!"

As if to confirm Louis's astonishment, the man's lips turned up in a confident smile as he basked in the flood of light belonging to the most powerful of spells. In a sonorous voice he loudly wove the final words of his incantation, "Run through my enemies and stifle their spirits. Now, go!"

He waved his hands to erase the numerous magic circles floating in the air before him as he finished his spell. Countless balls of fiery light appeared and torpedoed toward the mermen with a tremendous roar. The balls skewered the mermen, burning them alive.

The white flash finally died down, giving Mina the chance to

gingerly open her eyes and assess the situation. Before her not even the cinders of the dead mermen were left. They had been literally obliterated from the face of the planet.

...Am I seeing this right? Did he just wipe them out in a single hit?

Louis got to his feet first then helped her up. She stood there dumbly staring at their savior. Who was he? He had come to their rescue, but she'd never seen him before. He launched off such a powerful spell in a matter of seconds, so he had to be an expert Mage.

The black-haired Mage rolled his shoulders to release the tension, then strolled over to the dumbfounded Mina and Louis. Intelligence brimmed in his almond-shaped purple eyes that stood out all the more against his flawlessly black hair. He was tall, muscularly slender, and manly. As she was captivated by his good looks, he held up his right hand and greeted her with a charming, impish smirk.

"Yo. That was a close call. Anyone hurt?"

"Ah, uh..." His casual greeting threw off her tension, rendering her incapable of a proper thanks.

Louis stepped up to him first. "We made it out of that alive thanks to you. You appear to be a renowned Mage. May I ask your name?" Seeing how he threw in a smile, he seemed to have some idea of who their mystery savior was.

"I'm Leo Gaines," the black-haired man answered with a magnanimous grin. "I'm searching for some friends. Maybe you guys can help me out?"

Chapter 7: Leo's Feelings

HEH, don't see Minstrels too often...

Leo closely assessed the man and woman standing before him. By their gear alone, he could tell the man was a Minstrel and the woman a Thief. Both appeared skilled, but he couldn't shake the feeling that tackling a high level quest with two low damage dealing classes was foolish at best.

Which can only mean they have other party members somewhere?

As Leo was assessing the situation from every angle, the Minstrel clapped his hands together as if he just struck upon a new realization after hearing his name.

"Ooh, you must be the famous Mage, Sir Leo Gaines, who graduated at the top of his class at the Academy and was selected to serve alongside the current Hero, Elias Leland. It's an honor to meet you, Sir Gaines." The Minstrel held out his hand with an amicable smile.

Boy, I must be gettin' famous to run into people who know my background in random dungeons, Leo mused. He stuck out his right hand and shook the Minstrel's hand with a grin.

"I'm surprised you know me so well. Just call me Leo. You're a Minstrel, right?"

"Indeed. I'm the Minstrel Louis Neal. The lady with me is—"

"The Thief Mina Russel! Nice to meet ya!" The red-haired woman casually inclined her head and flashed a big smile.

She came across as a delightfully cheerful woman—a perfect match for the Thief class. Was she around the same age as Aki?

Mina intently studied Leo's face while he was comparing her to Aki. "By the way, you're Elias's friend, right? We actually took on this quest after forming a party with Elias and Aki. So we're acquainted with them, too, but...even though Elias gives off this immaculate-beauty-that-can't-possibly-exist-in-this-world feel, you're still quite the hottie yourself, Leo! I'm getting all nervous just looking at you! Hahaha!"

Louis quickly threw out, "I think I stand on par with them in terms of looks," and pouted.

But Leo was so caught up by what Mina had said he stopped paying attention. *They teamed up with Aki and Elias to take on a quest? Whoa, hold on.* He rubbed his chin. *That means they're already acquainted and traveling with 'em!* He fist-pumped in the air.

After parting ways with Elias and Aki at the Adventurers' Guild, Leo had struggled alongside Johann to infuse their magic into the mirror capable of teleporting them to the Dark Lord's castle. Once

they had finished with that task, Leo left the inn to bring them back from the Guild, only to discover they had taken on a high level Quest. He only went out alone because he felt healthier than a horse despite pouring more than a week's worth of magic into the mirror.

Johann, on the other hand, lost what little color his already stark white face had after using up so much of his magic to replenish the mirror and was rendered incapable of speaking, much less moving. Leo had Nako stay behind to look after him in case there were any severe side effects from draining his magic supply dry.

Leo's magic recovered at a baffling, monstrous speed, so he took it upon himself to get the others. The idiocy of them accepting a Quest now of all times gave him a headache, but he knew they were two big softies who couldn't say no—they'd probably been drawn into something complicated they couldn't avoid. Knowing his friends well enough, he decided to head to the same Quest location. He'd just help them finish it off, and return to the inn with them in tow.

And of all the luck, he happened across Mina and Louis, a pair of Adventurers who'd formed a party with his friends, within the Quest ruins.

With his prospects of finding the others increasing tenfold because of his lucky start, Leo optimistically asked Mina, "Hey, I had some other business to handle so I've been acting independently from Elias and Aki, but I've come to get them now. We're in a rush, so I wanna quickly wrap up this Quest and drag 'em back with me. Can you tell me where they're at?"

They should be somewhere close by. Leo cupped his hand over his forehead and gazed down the straight stone path, but he didn't see Elias or Aki. All he saw was the vast darkness spreading out on either side of the narrow passageway and merman corpses.

Unease began to settle in the back of his mind when he turned toward Louis and Mina. "Where are they? Did they go on ahead without you?"

Or did Elias and Aki have a reason to send Louis and Mina on ahead while they stayed behind to deal with other business? Leo should've seen them on the way there if they had though.

Mina pressed her lips together and dropped her gaze from Leo scratching his head. "...Honestly...we got separated from Elias and Aki..."

"Separated how?" Her unsettling choice of words furrowed his brow.

Louis directed his gaze down the gutter. "Monsters attacked us from behind before you showed up, and Aki, who happened to be at the back of our group at the time, ended up encountering their ambush first. She slipped and fell off the ledge while blocking an

attack.”

“Elias leapt in to save her, so they’re somewhere below...” Mina knelt down and peered over the ledge.

She fell down there...? Leo crouched down beside Mina and trained his eyes on the dark hole. At a glance, it appeared like an extremely deep pit. He could only hope that there weren’t any dangerous traps lying in wait for them.

Staying crouched, Leo drew a small magic circle in front of him and erased it with his fingers, giving birth to a small ball of light in his palm. He tossed the light ball into the gutter, shining a beacon of light into the darkness with a flick of his wrist.

The ball slowly descended, gradually growing smaller without impacting anything before eventually disappearing from view. His spell directed the ball to explode upon contact, and since it hadn’t, the pit was too deep for them to see when it finally did.

How freakin’ deep is this pit? Elias can get by somehow with his superhuman strength, but how did Aki fare with her low level? She must be traumatized by getting attacked and then falling into a bottomless pit. Did she get hurt? Is she safe?

The air ripped from Leo’s lungs as he imagined Aki plummeting to her doom and screaming at the top of her lungs, her face frozen in fear. *What the heck? What’s with me? I’m more shaken up by this than I realized. Just thinkin’ about something bad happening to the adorable woman who always calls my name with a smile makes me—*

“I...” he rasped between clenched teeth. Mina and Louis eyed him curiously, but he had lost too much self-control to care. “I could’ve protected her if I had been here...!”

Frustration and regret tore at him. He hated himself for not being there for her when she needed him most. Aki only came to this world to find her sister, but he’d used his summoning spell to draw her into this world’s problems. He had summoned her weapon, forcing her into the dangerous predicament where she was fated to fight monsters to save a world that was not her own. For all that, she never complained, but rather bravely did her best, igniting a desire within Leo to support her in any way he could.

Dammit! Leo slammed his fists into the ground.

Louis and Mina exchanged looks. “Leo, calm down,” Louis softly urged him from behind. “Elias’s enchanted item activated a float spell during their descent. We can be fairly positive they safely reached the bottom.”

“He’s right. Aki was wearing Elias’s cloak at the time, so his magic charm likely protected her. Knowing Elias, he took the best course of action using that protective spell... With my high detection skills, I should’ve noticed the surprise attack first. I’m sorry for not

proving useful when it counted most..." Mina bowed her head, her expression twisting with the regret and guilt plaguing her.

Leo rested his hand on her shoulder. "Sorry. I'm not blamin' you for it... I don't really get it myself, but I'm losin' my head thinking about her—'bout Aki being in danger where I can't reach her."

What's wrong with me? Why am I so concerned about Aki? Perplexed, he twisted his bangs between his fingers. *Why do I get so worked up when it comes to her?*

Mina gave Louis another look and gently tapped Leo's arm. "You really care for Aki a lot, huh, Leo."

"...Huh?"

Where'd that come from?

Mina's face softened into an understanding smile as he stared back at her like a boy lost in the woods. "You love Aki, don't you?"

"Wha—" His face instantly reddened and he slammed both hands on the ground to distract from it. "N-No way! I'd never fall for a klutz!"

Yep, it was impossible. She was such a klutz in everything she did. Also weak, meddlesome, and a big pain for making him worry about her all the time.

...No, that's not true, is it? Leo let out a long breath as he tried to face his feelings. *...Be honest with yourself. What good comes of deceiving myself here?*

Honestly, when I first summoned Aki, I grew worried for the future thinking I'd summoned the weakest possible support. But as I came to know her, I learned she's a hard worker, a caring person, and someone who possesses an innate kindness not many people have. I'm glad I summoned her.

I grew fond of her optimism over learning more about this world and how hard she was trying to support Elias as his Right-hand. Before I knew it, I found myself thinking she was cute for getting angry and laughing at the things I say.

And now, I've completely lost my ability to think after hearing she's in danger. I can't help wanting to be by her side, protecting her so she never has to go through such a scary experience again.

When it's all said and done, these feelings add up to...me havin' fallen for her.

"Ugghhh." Leo pulled at his hair.

A part of me struggles to believe I've fallen for that scatterbrain, but fact is, I'm drawn to her, without even realizing it. They say the more you like a girl, the more you want to tease her. Looking back, I've picked on Aki from day one and enjoyed her entertaining reactions.

But she's... Scenes of Aki and Elias laughing together crossed his mind. *She's got...Elias.*

I know that Elias and Aki love each other. I don't want to do anything as crude as get between them. Besides, Elias is my best friend. There's nothing greater than him finding happiness with her.

Leo shook his head, burying his feelings in the process, and looked from Mina to Louis who were waiting for him to work things out. "Like Mina here said, I...find myself drawn to Aki. Didn't realize what that meant till you pointed it out to me..."

His youth was free of romance as studying his butt off to maintain his grades at the Academy left him with no time for love. He never thought the day would come where he fell for someone this way.

Leo smiled like he had already given up on his feelings and scratched his right cheek. "But Aki loves Elias, yeah? He feels the same for her. So I don't plan to do anythin' with these feelings. I don't need anything else if Elias and Aki are happy together."

Ha! Can't believe the second I became aware of my feelings I'd instantly be struck with a broken heart. I feel like mockin' myself, but the situation is kinda inevitable. Not so unusual for best buds to fall in love with the same lady.

He gave his knees a good slap, rose to his feet, and flashed the others a halfhearted grin.

Louis shrugged, a sympathetic look on his face. "Love is complicated."

"...You sound like you're goin' through the motions yourself, Louis."

"I happen to be in the midst of a one-sided love myself," Louis said with a deeper meaning as he glanced at Mina dusting off her shorts beside him.

Mina froze in his gaze for but a second before glaring up at him and stomping on his foot. "C'mon, quit uselessly flapping those lips and start moving your legs! We have to meet up with Elias and Aki! Leo, we've got the same goal, so would you mind teaming up with us? Having you on our side is like recruiting an army of one thousand!" She threw her knife into the air and caught it.

"Sure thing," he agreed on the spot. "Not to be arrogant, but I'll be a huge help to you. Though I'm currently suffering the status ailment of heartbreak and emo feels," he joked, flicking his chest for extra effect.

Louis laughed. "There's no elixir for a broken heart. Only natural recovery over time can help you there. Setting aside the jokes, I'm looking forward to partying up with a world-renowned genius Mage. We had better use every skill at our disposal not to be outdone by him, Mina."

Mina firmly nodded.

You found some good friends, Elias.

Unique and talented people had a tendency to gather around him. Leo was dying to introduce them to Johann the moment their Hero Party membership became official. Johann had been nagging his ear off about finding a Minstrel, so this should shut him up on that front.

Mina pulled a map from the pouch hanging from her belt. “Leo, can you take a look at this? Here’s our current location...”

Leo peered over her shoulder at the map. “Okay. Looks like advancing north on this straight path is the fastest and only real route there...” He looked up from the map and down the dark passage, glancing over the ledge into the abyss below. “Unless we want to pull an Elias and jump?”

His light joke drew a chuckle from the group.

Partying with high level Adventurers means we can prioritize speed and wipe out every monster in our way without worrying about their MP hitting rock bottom. Defeating lots of monsters will increase Elias and Aki’s odds too. Stay safe, you two. Leo silently prayed for his friends.

Thinking about them made him feel like he hadn’t seen their faces in a long time. Perhaps it felt that way to him because they’d never been apart for any length of time before.

I want to see them soon... My best friend and the woman I fell for.

He had become aware of his feelings for Aki, but planned to never say anything. He was content watching over them from the sidelines, helping them stay together and find happiness forever.

Leo slapped his cheeks, then whacked both Mina and Louis on the back before raising his hand into the air. “All right, let’s march on to where we can reunite with Elias and Aki!”

Mina and Louis held their hands up next to his. “Aye, aye, sir!”

Chapter 8: Contact

JOHANN rested the charged hand mirror on top of the low table and flopped back on the ottoman with a sigh.

Phew. We somehow managed to pull it off...

He had thought they would need at least a whole day to fully charge the mirror, but between Leo's preposterous magic recovery rate and Johann's own blessed magic reserves inherited from his father, they had stored up enough magic for the Transference spell in less than half a day.

The two of them had pulled off what would normally require five or more Mages and Priests working together. Johann's sense of accomplishment tasted extra sweet.

"...Have I finally done something somewhat useful for Elias?" he absently muttered to the peeling inn ceiling, his bones aching with the weight of his exhaustion.

Guilt over being the Sanctuary's spy haunted his every waking moment. He could never make it up to his friends, but he wanted to be useful to them whenever he could. It didn't matter if he was just doing it for the self-satisfaction. Even if it was minuscule in the face of things, he wanted to repay them for accepting him as a friend and fellow party member.

Lying on his back, Johann recalled his conversation with Leo before he left.

After they had finished infusing the mirror with magic, Leo, who had more stamina and energy than someone who hadn't used any magic at all, left saying he was going to fetch Elias and Aki from the Adventurers' Guild. Elias had said he was going to check out the Guild with Aki before they had parted ways, so it was the best place to start. Johann could only hope they successfully met up.

Meanwhile, Johann, who had utterly gone past his stamina and magic reserves, stayed to rest until Leo came back with the others. Nako remained behind to look after him, and she had been busily fluttering around the room packing their things up and making him a light meal to eat.

Nako would make a fine wife. Johann wanted to smack his head for casually thinking such nonsense. *No, no, no. What am I even thinking!*

He didn't mean to look at her in that way. Exhaustion must've been getting the better of him. Yes, it was the exhaustion taking hold.

Either way, my head feels like it's being pounded on by ogres... He pressed the back of his hand to his forehead and cringed with the effort.

When he opened his eyes, Nako was peering down at his face from directly overhead. "Johann, are you feeling all right?"

"Wh-Whoa! Nako!" Johann instinctively scooted away from her big, brown eyes. Or rather, he had wanted to scoot away, but it didn't work so well lying on his back.

Nako hovered over him, adorably tilting her head, not noticing his sweaty panic. "Are you sure you are okay? Your face is red, Johann. Do you have a fever?"

"I-I do not. You're imagining it!"

She wasn't imagining his flushed cheeks, but he couldn't let her figure that out. He waved his hands in front of his face, hiding it.

Nako cutely furrowed her brow, doubting his word. "Are you positive? Please don't push yourself. You tend to put on a strong front."

"I do not—"

"You do too! You act strong, hate to lose, and endure everything alone!"

Ugh...

"You've got me there," he mumbled with a small laugh.

It hadn't been long since Johann had met Nako, but she already had a good grasp on his idiosyncrasies. Relaxation came easy in her presence. He didn't have to pretend around her or keep up his guard.

Seriously confronting his feelings, he had to admit he was drawn to her as a potential romantic partner. Not that he was going to make a move on her. After all, she had the Dark Lord.

Nako's actions more than proved she cared deeply for the Dark Lord, and her lack of fear proved he treated her well. It didn't take a genius to piece together that they were in love with each other.

Besides... Johann turned his head aside so she couldn't see his lonely smile. As the Pope's son, I'm not free to choose my future spouse. I'll be unconditionally forced to accept whoever Father picks for me.

I don't have the freedom to choose ANYTHING for myself...

Johann had grown up living to whatever beat his father played. His father's word was rule. No alternative paths had been made available to him.

Worried about his sudden silence, Nako drew back and hurried into the kitchen. He followed her with his eyes until she returned with a glass of ice water.

"Johann, how about you drink some water? Getting some liquids in you might help you feel better."

Grateful for her keen hospitality, Johann pushed himself into a sitting position. One sip of the water sent the cool liquid circulating through his system, easing some of his fatigue. He exhaled as a little tension seeped from him.

Now that he took a good look at his hand, he saw the cup shaking in his weak grip. *My body is having a more adverse reaction than I had expected.*

Johann placed the glass on the table before he accidentally dropped it and furtively observed Nako sitting directly across from him in the process. She was perched on the edge of the ottoman, staring into space while she swung her legs. She gave the impression of someone who was more innocent and younger than her age, and at the same time, she had a bewitching charm that screamed danger.

The Dark Lord's Right-hand, huh? Does she give off a mysterious aura because she was chosen for that role? Or was she chosen for that role because of it?

Johann looked away from her face and dropped his gaze to her hands folded on her lap. Sanctuary had dispatched advisory warnings to keep special vigilance on Nako as a potential threat. As one who supported the Dark Lord, she was a threat to the Sanctuary which fully backed the Hero.

With his role as spy, Johann should hop to his feet, arrest her right here and now, and promptly hand her over to the Sanctuary—I could never do that...

She came to them to propose a truce between the Dark Lord and Hero, and she was also the kindhearted woman who had stood up for him when circumstances bound his hands. Nor could he forget that she was Aki's precious little sister. He had absolutely no desire whatsoever to follow the Sanctuary's will to the dot if it meant betraying himself and his friends.

Yet that feeling ran contrary to the fact he continued to serve under the Sanctuary. He couldn't sever that connection as long as he was the Pope's son. Whatever he did, he would someday become the next ruler of the Holy Kingdom. That responsibility tied him down just as much as anything else. He couldn't shake free of what he was raised to do.

I'm a walking contradiction, aren't I? Remaining indecisive will only lead to me betraying both Elias and the Sanctuary someday.

Johann knew he couldn't stay on his current path. But he couldn't take the necessary step forward until he found the resolve in himself to choose which side he wanted to make an enemy of, because inevitably, choosing sides would do just that.

I'm pathetic... He huffed at himself.

Hearing his sigh, Nako turned a worried eye on him. "Is something wrong, Johann?"

He returned her gaze and shook his head, wordlessly signaling it was nothing. No way could he consult her about how to handle the situation involving her.

Wanting to change the topic, he went with, “By the way, I wanted to talk to you about Leo,” instead. “Didn’t you say he looks a lot like the Dark Lord?”

Johann had to be extra vigilant about all things concerning Leo and the Dark Lord. After all, if Leo turned out to be connected to the Dark Lord and joined the Hero Party anyway, he needed to be treated as a risk to the Hero smoothly completing his journey to save the world. Should such a truth come to light, Johann had the explicit duty to report back to the Sanctuary.

However, warning the Sanctuary about Leo would put him on their elimination list. Essentially, he would be placing a hit on his own friend. Johann cared for and admired the always kind, cheerful, and intelligent Leo as a friend.

He didn’t want to be the catalyst that caused him to be hunted down like a dog by the Sanctuary. Thus, he wanted to gather all the pieces and figure it out before the Sanctuary caught on.

Nako spoke slowly, sounding like she wasn’t too sure herself. “I did say that... They don’t look perfectly alike. They just have the same vibe. Their sharp facial features are similar, I guess...?”

“Is that so? But the Dark Lord doesn’t have any relatives. Or rather, it is impossible for him to be related to anyone by blood.”

“True... I understand what you are talking about. The Dark Lord was artificially created by the Goddess, after all.”

Johann’s eyes widened ever so slightly. As he suspected, the Dark Lord had informed Nako about the roles to be played by him and the Hero.

They were born as legendary symbols of this world, but their duty went deeper than merely putting their lives on the line to wage a war for the history books. The Goddess created them to replenish the world’s Creation Energy, and it was through their sacrificial deaths that the world would live. Such was the rule of their existence.

Sacrificial lambs had no relatives. Or they shouldn’t. However, without any solid information, it was hard to draw a conclusion on speculation alone.

Johann placed his hands on his lap and tried to end the conversation. “Sorry for suddenly bringing that up. Let’s save this talk for another time. Please let me know if you learn anything—” The words lodged in his throat when he looked up. Nako was hunched over in her chair holding her head between her hands. “Nako? Are you all right?!” He jumped off the ottoman.

Moaning in agony, Nako slid off the chair onto the floor. She miserably pressed her hands against her forehead. Was she in that much pain?

Johann tried to run over to her, but stopped when she jerked her

head up and yelled at him, "Please run! Johann!"

"What are—" One look at her face sent shockwaves through him.

Looming on her forehead was a crest oozing a reddish-black light. The peculiar crest was of a crescent moon embracing the full moon. Johann was dreadfully familiar with it.

That's the crest that governs the moon spoken about in the Book of Creation!

Per his father's orders, Johann spent most of his childhood reading and rereading the Book of Creation inside the Sanctuary's heavily protected library. The ancient text controlled solely by the Sanctuary chronicled the life and work of the Creator during the Creation Era.

Nako's forehead presently bared the mark of the Creation Goddess depicted in the Book of Creation. The records clearly stated that exact mark was carved into the Goddess's forehead.

Why in the world was that legendary mark on Nako?

"Johann! Hurry!" Nako cried out, barely holding onto her senses. Her cry brought Johann back from his confused thoughts.

Nako had been imploring with him to run—danger was imminent for both of them.

Johann dashed to the back wall, snatched up his staff, and held it defensively in front of him.

Right hand latched to her forehead, Nako unsteadily rose to her feet. She stared back at him with tears in her tormented eyes, her face contorting.

"...Johann, Kerdy, I'm sorr—" After her unfinished word of apology, Nako writhed in pain, her arms limply dropping to her sides. Her head drooped like a puppet with its strings cut.

Losing sight of her expression, Johann swallowed the bitter saliva in his mouth, and closely watched her for any signs of movement.

What is about to happen?! What is going to appear before me?

In the middle of that tense atmosphere, Nako's arms trembled. A second later, her head slowly pulled up in a ghostly manner as if she were being controlled by some invisible strings attached to the ceiling.

Johann blanched at her bluish-white complexion better suited to the dead than the living. All light vanished from her eyes—it was like looking into the pitch-dark depths of a Noh mask. Like looking into the eyes of a doll.

Nako examined her body from head to toe with clerical disinterest, then turned her neck from side to side, popping it. "...I'm finally able to take control now that she's out of reach of that repulsive Dark Lord's magic. This body isn't half bad, either," she drawled as if she were bored with the world, and flipped her long hair over her shoulder.



Her icy tone sounded like a completely different person from Nako.

Locking his sights on the transformed Nako beyond his staff, Johann ignored the sweat trailing his brow, and bent his knees for the battle he feared may soon ensue. Sweat drenching his tightly fastened hands weakened his grip on the staff and caused it to slip a little from his grasp.

The Goddess's crest engraved in her forehead was still emitting a dark red light he wanted to wither away from.

I can't move!

Every warning bell in his body screamed at him to run. But his fear was so great he was literally scared stiff.

Nako's dead eyes landed on where he was sewn to the ground. Her bewitching lips turned up at the corners in her first sign of amusement. "Oh, you feel familiar. You must be a direct descendant of the Sanctuary's founder."

"How do you—"

In just a few words, she had singled him out as the Pope's son. He tried asking how she knew, but she merely snorted at him.

Johann chewed his bottom lip and growled, "Who are you?"

Chapter 9: Flower Garden of Invitation

ELIAS was excitedly putting their things in order when he called out to Aki who was getting dressed behind a tall boulder. “Aki, are you almost done changing?”

“Yes! Sorry for the wait.” Clad in the now dry skirt suit Leo had summoned for her, Aki jogged out from the shadows. She stopped directly beside Elias and looked adoringly into his eyes from under her long lashes.

Elias scratched his flushing cheeks. *I can't quite put my finger on it, but...I feel curiously possessive of Aki when I think of her as my girlfriend.*

This is a new feeling for me after spending my whole life religiously holding to the idea that the Hero can't show favoritism. Or put another way, that the Hero couldn't love any one special person.

But now I'm struggling with how to control these feelings so that I won't burden Aki by acting on impulse.

“Figuring out how much to hold back is hard...”

“Hold what back?” Aki asked, slightly inclining her head.

Shoot! I said it out loud!

Realizing his slipup, Elias shook his head and tried to get by with a “It’s nothing.”

Aki wasn’t satisfied with that response—she put her hands on her hips and raised an eyebrow at him. “Oh, come now, don’t tell me you are still trying to run away from expressing how you really feel? That’s one of your worst habits, Elias! You should at least tell your girlfriend what’s on your mind!”

Blushing crimson, she leaned close to him, clenching her fists in front of her chest as she usually did whenever she became passionate about something. The way she tried her hardest to convey her love for him was insanely adorable.

Trying to control my feelings around her is like trying not to breathe. Aahh, I can't hold back, after all.

Elias gently captured Aki’s wrists and pulled her slowly toward him. When she fell against his chest, he wrapped his arms around her back and hugged her close. “I love you, Aki.”

“I l-love—stop it! Elias, we won’t get anywhere if we keep this up! Let’s go already!” She effortlessly pushed his chest away, interlocked her fingers with his, yanked him to his feet, and started dragging him along.

Am I going to end up dominated by her like this? I'm actually pretty okay with that.

Elias had always been in the role of leader—he had little experience being led. Lovingly watching her petite back marching

ahead of him, he silently wished: *I hope I can be with her like this forever.*

“**IS** it just me or is it getting chillier?”

“It’s definitely become colder with the mist. Visibility is getting worse too. Don’t stray too far from me, Aki.”

“I won’t,” Aki replied, the chill zapping some of the pep from her voice.

Elias put his arm around her shoulder, closing the small gap between them as they walked.

Since setting out, they had walked further into the inner depths of the underground cavern, but aside from the occasional water droplet hitting the ground, it was dead silent and drearily dark. Elias’s lantern illuminated the slippery wet rock walls, which reflected the light with a ghostly halo ring.

The deeper they went the icier the air became, and worst of all, a thin veil of mist curled around their legs. Their clothing grew damp and clung to their bodies, stealing away their body heat as the relentlessly frigid air touched it.

We’re in danger of freezing if we stay in this environment too long. Things would be different if he could use Fire magic like Leo, but the Hero regrettably had no talent for magic. I wonder what Leo’s doing right now... Has he finished infusing the mirror with enough magic to use the transference spell?

We have to finish this Quest off and get back fast, or else Leo and Johann will worry. Elias naturally picked up the speed with Aki.

Eventually the narrow, straight path they were on turned around a corner. Going around this sharp bend would put them back on track with the main route likely followed by the others several levels above. Relieved, Elias walked toward the corner and was about to step into the wider passage when his ears caught the sound of something slippery dragging along the ground.

“...Elias? What’s wrong?” Aki stopped and looked anxiously to him.

“Quiet,” he whispered, pressing his index finger to his lips.

The dragging noise was growing louder by the second. It sounded like someone was bouncing a ball of goo on the ground and trying to yank it back off. Elias drew Aki closer with his right arm and put their backs flat against the rock wall, hiding their presence from whatever was fast approaching.

“...I’m positive that’s the sound of monsters. I don’t sense any other Adventurers in this dungeon—we are the primary target for the

monsters lurking here. Aki, can you check your notebook for me?" Elias asked in a quiet voice.

Aki pulled the notebook from her pocket and laid it on her palm. It flipped open to a double page map displaying three red lights traveling on the main passage around the corner. Though the monsters were moving at a snail's pace, they were undeniably on a direct path to them.

Their slow movement speed means they're an adhesion class monster, Elias concluded based on the information available, and thanked Aki, gesturing for her to close the notebook.

"Three enemies, huh? Well, I should be able to manage those numbers on my own," Elias remarked casually.

"You *should* be able to?" Aki didn't hide the surprise in her voice. "Are they that strong?"

"Nah, they aren't strong per se. Adhesion class monsters tend to fall under the same shape and classification as slimes, but that's the hardest type to fight with a sword. I'm stuck using the Holy Sword because of limitations placed on the Hero, so I'm not well-suited to taking them on." Elias glanced down at his sword and added, "Leo and Louis's spells work best."

Aki tapped her index finger against her chin as if trying to draw on some past memory. "Slimes are those round, colorful blobs, right?"

"Right. I'm surprised you knew that."

"Slimes come up in a lot of movies and games in my world. We don't actually have any real monsters, so they're written as fictional creatures."

"Movies? Games? I'm not too familiar with those, but when you put it like that, it seems like our worlds have a lot in common. It's like the worlds were conceived in a similar way. Perhaps there's more connecting them than we realize."

Elias shook his head to stop his thoughts from wandering down an unnecessary path. Now wasn't the time to be contemplating deep things—he needed to figure out how to cut a path through the slimes.

With his back flat against the wall, Elias poked his head around the corner until the slimes were within view. Just as Aki's notebook warned, monsters formed from living, wicked jelly wriggled and bounced their way closer, leaving a slimy trail behind them.

"Aki, we don't have much time, so I'll make this quick. Slimes are a type of adhesive monster in a jelly state with the special ability to divide their bodies into more slimes. Their numbers increase every time you cut them. There's no way to obliterate them without fire magic. Thing is, you and I are both physical damage dealers, so our best bet is to stun them long enough to flee."

"O-Okay... Basically, don't cut them up unless we want them to

multiply,” Aki repeated, her face growing pale. Elias gravely nodded.

Physical damage dealers were incapable of inflicting the death blow to slimes without a Mage in their party. In their situation, running was tantamount to winning.

“Here’s my strategy...” Keeping half his concentration on the unique squicky sound of the approaching slimes, Elias turned his head toward Aki. “I’m going to charge straight through while carrying you. We can’t defeat the slimes, so our best bet is to run right past them.”

“Seriously?!” Aki whipped her head back and forth. “I can run by myself! I don’t want to be a burden to you!”

“You’re not a burden at all. I’d prefer that to freaking out about you possibly tripping and falling behind me,” Elias stated in all seriousness.

Aki angrily puffed out her cheeks. “Wh-What the heck?! You’re horrible for assuming I’d trip and fall! Hey! Whoa!”

Elias scooped the miffed Aki into his left arm and drew the Holy Sword with his right. *Aki’s even lighter than I thought... Has she lost weight after being forced to live in a new world? She always acts happy, but this proves the fatigue is getting to her. I hope I can let her rest a bit after this Quest. Getting through the predicament in front of us comes first, though!*

“Aki, hold on to my neck so you don’t fall. Here we go!” Aki securely in his arm, Elias pushed off from the wall and bolted around the corner. He charged into the pile of slimes faster than a loosed arrow.

Detecting Elias and Aki, the slimes rolled toward them in an avalanche of colorful goo.

“Yuck! Elias, the slimes are rolling toward us!”

“It’s okay! Don’t speak or you might bite your tongue!”

After glancing briefly at Aki, who said nothing more, Elias charged into the slimes without slowing and lashed out at the nearest one with the Holy Sword. Sliced in half, two goopy chunks hit the ground, forming two more bouncing blue slimes.

Not stopping to look, Elias stepped hard on his front foot, launching himself nimbly into the air as if an invisible wind pushed beneath his feet. Cleanly landing on the other side of the slimes, he ran nonstop down the passageway.

No point in wasting stamina against an unbeatable enemy. Slimes lacked the speed to catch up to Elias, so cutting a path through them and charging ahead was the best plan of action.

Confirming Aki was all right while she clung to his neck with her eyes squeezed shut, Elias headed for the dungeon depths, putting an even greater distance between them and their slimy foe.

“OKAY, I think we’re good.”

After sprinting into the back of the cave without much thought, Elias stopped at a hollowed out piece of rock and confirmed that no slimes were directly behind them.

The long passage they had been running through didn’t have a modicum of light or sound.

...I don’t detect the slimes anywhere near us. We completely shook them off our trail. Elias exhaled and lowered Aki to the ground. She staggered once before steadying herself.

“Thank you, Elias. I wonder if they are still following us...”

“We should be fine. I put a good distance between us. The slimes shouldn’t be able to sense our body heat anymore.”

“Glad to know that...” she sighed.

Elias led her by the hand while keeping a vigilant eye on their surroundings. After pushing blindly forward inside the never-changing, poorly lit, damp passage, they finally saw light break through the darkness ahead. Possibly from a clearing.

Elias and Aki looked at each other, laced their fingers, and passed through the exit obscured by blinding light. Their eyes instantly adjusted to the breathtakingly beautiful scenery.

Waiting beyond the dark passage was an open clearing with a domed cave ceiling more than several dozen buildings tall. Blue glowing lilies bloomed in profusion across the wide space. Balls of shimmering pollen danced around the space like fireflies. It was like a magical garden straight out of a fairy tale.

The lush flowers surrounded a large underground lake in the center of the clearing, their blue light reflecting off the water’s surface like countless stars in the sky.

It looks like an ancient garden... Awe of their beauty may have stopped Elias in his tracks, but an altogether different reason prevented him from taking the next step. It was unnatural for flowers to bloom profusely deep underground. Most of all, the spooky beauty of it led him to believe strong magic was at play.

These ruins have an abnormal water element level. Could this clearing be the cause for that? An underground lake...water attribute... Racking his brain, Elias surveyed their surroundings with a wary eye.

“So pretty...” Aki muttered breathlessly.

“...I didn’t think there was such a huge lake below the ruins. That temple may have been built because of this lake,” Elias observed as he took in the unearthly scenery beside her.

“Maybe they built the temple to protect or worship the lake?”

“Or they built it to seal in a powerful monster.”

“I hope not...” Aki shuddered. He hoped not as well.

The garden’s ethereal beauty was enough to send shivers down his spine, but the unknown factors surrounding it were spine-tingling in their own right.

I don’t know why, but something in my gut is telling me to run... I don’t think it’s wise to proceed.

But staying still and doing nothing would slowly zap them of energy as the chill scraped away at their stamina. They could stay put until Mina and Louis showed up, but he had no guarantee they would make it this far any time soon. If at all.

Which means we have to trudge on alone...

Coming to that conclusion, Elias grabbed Aki’s hand to reassure her. “...This place doesn’t feel right. Whatever you do, don’t leave my side.”

The flowers swayed and rubbed against each other despite the lack of wind. The cavern shook with their rustling as if it were a living creature, arousing fear deep in the pit of his belly. Even the blue light of the flowers shifted from a tranquil illumination to the bewitching lure of a jack-o'-lantern inviting the unwitting to their death.

Elias drew the Holy Sword from its sheath with his right hand and took his first step into the flower field with Aki’s hand firmly locked in his left. His foot crushing the ground below sounded awfully loud in his ears.

I hope I’m just being overly sensitive... Elias pressed his lips together to fight against the overwhelming alarm clawing at his chest.

Chapter 10: Pride

“YOU feel the need to ask who I am?” Nako snorted, bemused by Johann’s wariness of her. “You already know the answer, don’t you? Johann Clarence.” She pushed the bangs off her forehead and showed him the moon crest engraved there.

I knew it. That’s the Creation Goddess’s crest.

An exact copy of the crest recorded in the Book of Creation was right before him. This was his first time seeing the real thing. The crest was far more beautiful and fear-inspiring than he had imagined.

Johann slowly exhaled and fixed his eyes upon Nako to ascertain the truth for himself. “You are the Creation Goddess—nay, seeing as you bear the mark of the moon on your forehead, I suppose you are the Lunar Goddess?”

Instead of a verbal confirmation, a thin smile stretched her lips.

From the start of Creation, the world’s very existence hinged on circulating the Creation Energy said to be its lifeblood. Every world leader knew that fact well, although the general public was wholly unaware. And only these world leaders knew that the world occasionally gave birth to the Hero and Dark Lord in order to supplement its energy supply with their sacrifice.

Things weren’t always this way. In the beginning, the world didn’t burn through more energy than could be naturally restored. This natural order was only possible through the Creation Goddess’s careful maintenance of the world’s energy, eliminating the need to give birth to the Dark Lord and Hero as sacrificial energy replenishers.

So then why did the world lose its natural balance?

It all went back to the Pope’s bloodline that served the Sanctuary for generations—back to Johann’s ancestor, the Sanctuary’s founder.

This world came into existence when a being called the Creator used his wisdom to create the world from scratch and left the two goddesses he created in charge of managing it. The two goddesses were named the Solar Goddess and the Lunar Goddess, respectively. The Solar Goddess reigned over the positive energies that filled the world, and the Lunar Goddess reigned over the negative energies, creating balance in the world between the two of them.

The world developed beautifully under their exceptional dominion. First, they allowed the flora and fauna to flourish, and then they created mankind with sophisticated minds capable of creating civilizations and cultures from nothing.

Mankind called this first era the Creation Era, the people of the time Ancients, and their system of writing Ancient Script. The Ancients consolidated language with their ancient letters and

transferred their knowledge to future generations by writing on stone plates and paper. Thanks to their efforts, the world's industries and technologies developed at tremendous speeds.

The goddesses watched over the developing world as if it were their child. Thus, the world should have woven an eternally peaceful history. Peace, however, is finite.

The peace of the prosperous Creation Era, did not last long.

The Ancients formed a governing body known as the Sanctuary, and the grave sin committed by the Ancient who founded it—by Ivan Clarence, Johann's ancestor, invited the disaster that caused the negative energies in the world to overwrite and overwhelm the positive.

This caused the world to become unbalanced and constantly afflicted by natural disasters until it teetered on destruction.

The Creator, who had watched the whole story unfold, made a crucial decision when the problems grew beyond what humanity could solve.

Diminishing the powers of the Lunar Goddess who governed negative energies was the only way to calm the chaos. Sealing the Lunar Goddess was the only option.

For the Creator, it was a difficult decision to seal one of the two goddesses he thought of as beloved daughters because of humanity's selfish conduct. Inevitably, he chose to prioritize the world he had created over the Goddesses he loved.

The Creator and Solar Goddess took down the Lunar Goddess, deranged from the rapid explosion of negative energy, and laid her body and soul to rest at the center of the world. Left in charge of maintaining the world alone, the Solar Goddess used her powers to repair the half-destroyed world.

However, it was too difficult to maintain the world's order when it was built on a system of two. Without the Lunar Goddess's assistance, she lost the ability to regulate Creation Energy.

Thus, the Solar Goddess gave birth to the Hero and Dark Lord as a last-ditch method to replenish the unbalanced Creation Energy through their sacrifice. That was the start of the Hero and Dark Lord's relationship with the Creation Goddesses.

Since the entire history of the Creation Era was recorded in the Book of Creation, the Sanctuary doggedly kept it locked away, viciously hiding the secrets about how their founder was the deadly sinner who had brought the world to near destruction.

That is the extent of what I know... Johann relied on his memory to recall the world's history as told by the Book of Creation. If memory served him well, the Lunar Goddess's body and soul were sealed at the center of the world—she shouldn't be capable of speaking with him

now.

Yet the Lunar Goddess had taken over Nako's body. What in Creation did all this mean?

Johann sharply raised his gaze to meet hers. "Please answer me this one thing: Lunar Goddess, you should have been sealed by the Creator and Solar Goddess to silence the chaos in the world. How are you capable of borrowing Nako's body? Has your seal been released?"

"...I'm surprised you know that much, boy. I suppose you could roughly summarize it as my seal being released. I've been dying for a new body to inhabit since mine has long since decayed. So I took preemptive action by imbuing the sisters the Solar Goddess planned to summon this time around with my magic, altering their constitutions to easily house my soul. The older sister's wavelengths outright rejected me, but the younger sister is a surprisingly perfect match. Hence why I'm enjoying her body right now." She waved her hands suggestively over Nako's body.

Johann frowned. "You did it preemptively? You knew Aki and Nako would be summoned to this world beforehand?"

"Naturally. I knew from the day they were conceived. The Right-hands are born around the time the Hero and Dark Lord are created."

Johann's head hurt. He fairly easily grasped that the Lunar Goddess had been freed from her seal. He also understood how she had possessed Nako. The question was why she felt the need to do so. What was her ultimate goal?

"Lunar Goddess, please tell me what you are after. What do you want to do with Nako's body? Won't the world regain order and no longer need the Hero and Dark Lord if you work together with the Solar Goddess?" Johann eagerly asked of her.

Nako shook her head. "Johann, I don't want to let this world that he—that the Creator loved so much—continue existing in this volatile state. This failure that can't exist without us Goddesses imbuing it with Creation Energy isn't the ideal world he set out to create. That's why I want to end this world with these hands. To do that, I must destroy the current Dark Lord and Hero. The world will fall apart on its own as long as it doesn't get a fresh injection of Creation Energy."

"What is wrong with you...?" he bit out.

Didn't the Creation Goddesses exist to protect the world? Johann had never heard of such ridiculousness as a goddess desiring world destruction.

The Solar Goddess created the Hero and Dark Lord to fulfill her wish of extending the world's life, but the Lunar Goddess just announced the opposite—she wanted to erase the Hero and Dark Lord to fulfill her wish of ending the world.

The Goddesses want two different things?

The situation was out of his hands before it even started. It was questionable if the Lunar Goddess would even answer him if he asked her more. In which case, he had better figure out what he was going to do about this situation before time ran out.

The Lunar Goddess wanted both Hero and Dark Lord dead. In other words, she was a threat to his best friend Elias and Nako's beloved Dark Lord—Nako who he had come to care for.

Elias, the Dark Lord, and the possessed Nako—he had to stop the Lunar Goddess here in order to protect them.

He had to fight her—even if he stood no chance of winning.

Johann expelled all the air in his lungs, fastened both hands around his staff and held it out in front of him.

Nako narrowed her frigid eyes on him. "I had no intention of harming you now if you obediently told me where to find the Hero and retreated, but...it appears you have taken that option off the table."

"...Your circumstances are too complex for a mere mortal such as myself to fully comprehend, but...you have made your intentions to harm my friends clear. Thus, I cannot retreat from your presence now. Tell me this: why didn't you take over Nako sooner? You should have had ample opportunity to take Elias and the Dark Lord's lives using her."

Pretending to be Nako would've given her plenty of chances to get close to Elias and the Dark Lord. Why was she going about it in such a roundabout manner?

Nako held out her left hand and showed Johann the crimson gemstone ring on her ring finger. Johann puzzled his brow over that blood-colored ring.

The ring had been on her finger from the moment they met. She had likely received it from the Dark Lord.

The Lunar Goddess glared hatefully at that ring with Nako's face. "...This is why I haven't taken over this girl sooner. That wretched Dark Lord gave her this powerful magic charm. This ring is imbued with enough of his magic to suppress my personality. But its effects wear off when she is too far from him. So here I am, taking control at last. I assume the Dark Lord has already sensed I've possessed this child and is preparing to push me back under the surface."

"...I see. So it wasn't an ordinary ring."

The Dark Lord had used a magic ring to protect Nako from the Lunar Goddess. He had succeeded until now, so he was capable of fending her off. Johann just had to buy enough time until he came running to Nako's aid then. After all, a mere mortal couldn't exchange blows with the Lunar Goddess and walk away from it.

Cold sweat trailed down his cheek. Johann was stronger than the

average magic wielder, but storing most of his magic into the mirror had left him bone dry.

I don't have enough magic left to hold her back for any length of time. I have no choice but to...use that.

Johann slowly raised the cross-shaped staff and powerfully struck it into the ground. A high-pitched clang shook the room.

Nako raised a dubious eyebrow. "What do you think you are doing, boy?"

"I am playing my trump card to increase my odds of standing against you. You should know what that is."

Johann supported the staff with one hand and touched the tip with his other. He quietly closed his eyes in prayer. "O Goddess of Creation, release the golden scabbard," he whispered sanctimoniously.

With his final word, a crack formed in the staff and spread like a spider web. Bluish-white light leaked from the cracks, radiating mightily in every direction. The cracks eventually spread across the entire staff until it burst into pieces and out came a long spear like it was breaking free of its shell.

Beautiful golden wings held the spear's large, silver head in place. The elaborate, slender weapon stood at twice Johann's height.

Nako's eyes went momentarily wide before she ran a finger over her lips. "I see. You called forth the Holy Spear—one of the holy relics on par with the Hero's Holy Sword. You kept it hidden on you."

"Indeed. This is the Holy Spear the Creation Goddesses—you and your sister—bestowed upon the Sanctuary's founder, Ivan Clarence. I am his descendant and have inherited his holy relics." Johann spun the spear in his hands and thrust it back into the ground.

The Holy Relics were sacred weapons created with blood from the Goddesses during the Creation Era. As the Lunar Goddess alluded, Elias's Holy Sword was one of those sacred weapons.

Unlike normal weapons, the holy relics possessed the special ability to increase the user's magic and attack to abnormal levels. In return, the user's body had to bear the burden of that overwhelming strength. In Johann's case, he'd be able to launch off powerful spells by draining his MP dry.

Only people related to the Goddess such as Elias and the Dark Lord, or direct descendants of Ancients who had been bestowed one during the Creation Era were capable of wielding the holy relics.

I can't believe I'm resorting to wielding the Holy Spear that already guzzles magic on my best days when I barely have enough left in the tank to stand...

Any groundbreaking spells cast with the Holy Spear could probably only be used once or twice before he fainted from the strain. Johann tightened his hands on the spear until they turned white.

But I have no other way to stand against the Lunar Goddess... He was about to fight one of the Creation Goddesses. Chances of winning the battle were nil, but fighting with the Holy Spear would help him hold out longer. *The odds aren't in my favor, but I just have to last until the Dark Lord shows up!*

Johann lifted his head to show her he was determined to fight. "Lunar Goddess, I vow on my name as Ivan Clarence's descendant and Hero Elias's party member that I will stop you here. You will be returning Nako to me."

"Cute. Bravery is nothing more than foolishness when it comes to throwing your life away. I wonder how long you will last, spawn of Ivan," Nako cackled.

Johann reached inside his vestments and pulled several gold talismans out between his fingers and threw them. They embedded in every corner of the room with a cool clang.

Without missing a beat he held up the Holy Spear and began chanting, "O Creation Goddess, wrap us in your protection."

Pale light framed the spearhead, and the talismans he sent to the four corners shone in resonance. A square barrier like a thin veil of glass deployed from the talismans.

Aggh... Johann staggered forward with what felt like a ton of bricks having fallen on his back. He used the Holy Spear as a makeshift cane. *This is more burdensome than I expected.*

Sweat rolled from his downturned head, forming tiny puddles on the floor.

Nako swept her gaze around the room, looking wholly impressed with him. "Interesting play. You put up a barrier to reduce casualties."

"Yes, I did. One hit from your attacks could blow this city off the maps."

I just used one of my spells... Two left, if the Creator is on my side. Johann pressed his forehead against the spear and caught his breath. He used some of his remaining energy to create a barrier capable of separating the inn room from the rest of the city, effectively limiting the damages to that single location. It was an advanced dimensional spell that couldn't be activated without assistance from the Holy Spear.

...Casting one spell has created this much strain on my body... Biting his lower lip to stay grounded, Johann concentrated on Nako in front of him.

Spells cast through the Holy Spear were so draining he felt like passing out after just one. Forcefully casting them could cost him his life. But now wasn't the time to be stingy—the Lunar Goddess would kill him if the spear didn't.

Smiling in merciless ecstasy, Nako slowly spread her arms. Wind

swept up her chestnut hair and her body rose off the ground. "It's a magnificent barrier. You certainly inherited Ivan Clarence's talent, spawn. And I couldn't be more disgusted by it," she seethed.

Johann's lips curled into a triumphant smile. "...I'm sure you are. Ivan was the sinful man who threw your life into chaos. You could never forgive a blood relative of Ivan's after what he did to your precious Creator. But I'm in the same boat because I cannot forgive you for controlling Nako. I will stop you here even if it costs my life."

"I see. You have my respect for your unwavering determination. I have nothing against you personally, but...your body has to pay the price for that man's sins." Nako's pitying smile vanished with the rest of her expression.

Johann's body tensed before the godly monster facing off with him. *My spine feels like ice.* He tightened his grip on the spear in a bid to stop his arms from shaking. He knew this was a battle he couldn't win. That he might lose his life here. *But...*

Unflinching determination burned in his eyes. Elias, Aki, and Leo's faces came to mind. Knowing them, they would face any enemy without faltering, even if they knew they couldn't win. They would do everything in their power to save a friend.

Johann wanted to put up a fight that wouldn't shame his fellow party members. Perhaps he didn't deserve to call them his friends when all he ever did was keep secrets from them and lie through his teeth. But, the truth was, he always looked up to them. He admired the way they trusted each other, their strength, and their kindness.

Can someone as filthy as me become a part of their brilliance? If I could become their ally in the truest sense, I'd...

Burning with his desire to survive, Johann trained his eyes on Nako and readjusted his grip on the spear. Closing his eyes in concentration, he ordered every ounce of magic in his bones into the spear.

This was a do-or-die battle. He had to go big or go home if he wanted to welcome the others back with Nako.

"I can't lose to you here...!" Johann swept the Holy Spear glowing silver with his magic down on Nako.

Elias, Aki, Leo! Please lend me your strength!

Chapter 11: Out of the Frying Pan...?

“MINA, it went your way!” Leo shouted to the Thief with her back up against his.

“On it!” Mina bent her knees and glared at the monsters circling them. About ten adhesive class monsters, slimes, had them surrounded.

They’re even more disgusting when they show up stuck together. Scrunching her nose, Mina sliced through the slimy projectiles launched at her by the sticky, round balls. The stone floor sizzled and melted away under the two halves of the fallen projectile. Mina blanched and cringed.

They spit highly acidic mucus! Yuck! One hit and you’re out! My armor will easily melt off, ugh. Facing forward, Mina scanned the area behind her.

Near the doorway, directly opposite of her current position, Louis had just finished casting a confusion spell on the slimes. Dazed by its effects, a slime bounced into the gutter. There was something comedic about the slime happily bouncing into a black hole.

Neat. Minstrels have a surprisingly wide variety of spells.

Louis’s spells inflicted status effects rather than direct damage. Minstrels were especially useful in parties taking on powerful monsters because they wore down the monster’s defenses, removed their positive status bonuses, and weakened it for the DPS classes to sweep in and inflict heavy damage without taking many hits themselves.

Minstrels needed to memorize each and every elaborate spell incantation, and their skills weren’t as showy as a Mage’s or instantly useful as a Priest’s, so few people chose that particular class. Louis had to have gone through years of training with the plethora of spells he knew.

He’s always joking around, but he’s a hard worker at heart.

Louis normally acted like a clown, but behind that wisecracking exterior was a man who put in twice as much work as everyone else. Yet he never let anyone see him trying. Maybe he couldn’t let go of his pride as a nobleman.

Thinking about him in that light made his personality—quirks and all—a lot more appealing to Mina.

Geh! Now I just sound like a girl crushing on him! Mina stamped her feet to squash her own conclusion even though she was in the middle of dodging slime spit.

Her thoughts kept going back to him suavely cheering her up and putting himself in danger to protect her. He sure seemed to be paying

a lot of attention to her, too.

Every time he did something for her it brought a giddy grin to her face and filled her with the hope he didn't do the same for others. His actions set her heart aflutter with unexpected feelings.

Y-Yeah, right! Like hell I'm gonna admit that! Me, falling for a clown like him? Not in a million years!

Her eyes locked with Louis's just as she was becoming frustrated with her feelings for him. Unaware of her mental state, his handsome face broke into a teasing smile when he saw her.

"Having problems there, Mina? You've stopped fighting! Mayhap you've become smitten with my magnificently beautiful spells?" Louis drawled in his perfected narcissist tone.

Mina pitched forward. *He always ruins his cool moments with lines like this!*

"In your dreams, buddy! I'd fall for the slimes' acid attacks before your magic!"

He'd be a great guy if he wasn't so in love with himself.

Leo chuckled and quickly counted the remaining slimes. "We've chiseled down their numbers, so I'll clean up the rest with my spell. You might wanna stand back if you don't wanna get caught up in it." He started drawing a magic circle in the air with his long fingers.

All the air in the room pulled toward him in waves. The elements existing around them were gathering at his fingertips to fulfill his spell. He was like a magnet for the elements.

Better stay out of his way! Mina silently hopped several feet away from Leo, careful not to disturb his concentration. Watching him elegantly casting the spell from a distance left her speechless. His fingers accurately traced several circles and the ancient script within them as if the air was his canvas.

Each line he drew glowed red—a sign he was casting a fire spell. Adhesive class monsters were weak to fire.

It should've been an impossible feat casting any fire-based spells when water literally oozed from the walls. Seeing as he continued chanting with his calm confidence, the lack of fire element wasn't a problem for Leo.

Finishing his incantation with graceful elegance, Leo raised his right hand within the blinding light surrounding him. He swiped his hand through the bedazzling circle, erasing it.

"One hit from this and slimes are toast. Eat fire, slimeballs!" Leo jeered, holding his right palm out.

Fireballs rained down on the slimes in thunderous succession. Ringing filled Mina's ears.

He doesn't hold back! She had to cover her ears to protect them from the roaring explosions.

Goo torn from the slimes' bodies upon impact splattered at her feet. Seeing as the goo was scorched black, the slimes were being pulverized and burnt alive at the same time. Once the fireworks display ended, white smoke hung in the air with a hiss. The smoke gradually cleared, revealing only colorful splatter marks on the ground where the slimes had been obliterated. It almost looked like someone had painted the room with dried up jelly.

"Dang, they fry up easy!" Leo nonchalantly clapped his hands together and rolled his shoulders.

H-His spells always seem like cheating...

Mina was floored by the way Leo launched high-tier spells one after the other without breaking into a sweat. He was awesome, but he didn't brag or lord it over them. Were all Mages this powerful?

No, Mina had partied with several dozen different Mages while questing, and not a single one could use multiple high-tier spells in a row, if any at all.

He's in a class of his own.

The world extolled Leo Gaines as a genius Mage—and it appeared they weren't exaggerating. This was a once in a lifetime opportunity to fight alongside a record-setting Mage.

Mina spun the dagger in her right hand and sheathed it behind her back. Louis strapped the gittern to his back and walked over to Leo in the center of the room.

"Leo, Mina, you both did great. Especially you, Leo. As a fellow Lunar Magic user, I learned a lot from your spell's great éclat."

"Thanks, Louis. You cast some awesomely refined spells as well. I've heard that Minstrels must have a solid understanding of magic theory to properly cast a status effect or else they'll misfire."

"My talent with magic pales in comparison to yours. By the way, I must ask: what is the best order to draw the magic circle for the fireball spell you used?"

"Oh, you start with—"

"Whoa, hold your horses, boys." Mina sprinted over to the Lunar Magic nerds, desperate to stop them before they delved into a deep discussion.

No doubt about it, two lovers of magic like them wouldn't stop talking once they got started. They had to regroup with Aki and Elias pronto—now wasn't the time for idle chatter.

Mina threw herself between them and spread out her arms. "Guys, you can talk your hearts out once this Quest is over! Fun conversations aside, how are you two doing on magic? You should probably start conserving for the battles ahead..."

While that sounded good in theory, the monsters were growing stronger the deeper they went—reducing the number of encounters

was about the only option to conserve their magic.

Judging from the rising monster levels, the king of the ruins—the dungeon’s boss—was likely up ahead. They had simply been pushing deeper and deeper into the ruins in hopes of meeting up with Elias and Aki, although the scenery never changed despite progressively descending underground. They were still on that straight path flanked by a deep gutter.

Are we really making progress? Mina was growing restless thinking they were looping around the same path.

Leo scratched the back of his head. “Well, it doesn’t hurt to be conservative. Things might get tough later if we don’t leave a little magic in the tank. Though we’ve been goin’ at this for a while without reaching the end. Maybe we should just take a leap of faith into the pit?” Sighing, he took a step forward to peer into the gutter near the wall.

Something clicked under his toes and a piece of the stone floor lowered. The color drained from their faces.

“...H-Hey, Leo?” Mina warily called out when he froze up on top of the indented stone. “Did you just step on something...?”

“...I-I might’ve.”

“Don’t sound so unsure! You totally stepped on it! A trap was definitely triggered just now!”

“Don’t blame me! I didn’t see it there! What was I supposed to do?”

“Lame excuse! Traps are meant to be hidden!”

Louis pulled Mina and Leo apart and shouted, “Now’s not the time to debate! I hear something rumbling behind—”

Tremors and the sound of a gigantic stone rolling grew louder behind them. Hoping it was just their imagination, they fearfully looked back—a giant boulder, only slightly smaller than the passageway, was rolling masterfully down the straight path at breakneck speed.

Oh my Goddess!

Mina, Leo, and Louis flinched and took off running in the opposite direction of the incoming boulder.

“I can’t believe they went with such a classic trap!” Leo’s face spasmed as he sprinted for his life.

“Many still believe the classics are the best!” Louis noted.

“Hey, you guys, quit enjoying yourselves and come up with a plan!” Mina screamed.



Can we do anything to stop the boulder or destroy it? Mina racked her brain as she fled. *My dagger and knives won't do squat. Maybe a spell could do the trick?*

"I've got it!" Mina cried out from where she ran in front of the guys. "Magic! Use magic, Leo! Can't you blast that boulder to smithereens with your nifty spells?!"

The boulder was a pebble before Leo's super magic.

Leo stiffly shook his head behind her, the color leeching from his face. "I can't! The boulder is comin' too fast! I'll be squashed flat before I can finish the spell!"

"Fascinating. So even your rapid-fire incantations aren't fast enough. Outrunning it is our best bet! Run like your life depends on it!" Louis bellowed.

Mina and Leo had no better plan, so the three of them ran like the wind. If they could only make it into the next room, the boulder should get stuck in the doorway.

Possessing the highest agility, Thief Mina ran several feet in front of Leo, with Louis trailing behind them both.

Is Louis going to be okay?!

Mina activated her monster detection skill to alert her about any hidden monsters ahead while worrying about Louis falling behind. Magic classes such as Mages and Minstrels had much lower physical stats than a physical damage dealer like Mina. The more they raised their intelligence stats the more difficult it became for them to level up their stamina and agility.

Leo fell into a category of his own with that six-pack of his that could only be the fruit of daily training regimens. Louis, however, didn't seem like he had enough stamina to outrun an angry boulder.

Driven mad with worry, Mina slowed a little to look back at Louis. When she did, her right foot sunk into the ground with a click—she had stepped on another trap trigger.

...Uh? I just stepped on something, didn't I? The blood draining from her face like the waves during low tide, Mina came to a complete stop. Leo immediately caught up to her and grabbed her by the shoulder.

"Mina! What's wrong?! Don't stop!" He impatiently snatched up her hand and tried to pull her with him.

"...I have to, Leo!"

"Why?!"

She clutched his hand in both of hers and tugged back against his pull. "I stepped on it..."

"Huh?"

"I just stepped on a bloody trap, tooooooo!" she cried out at the same time the stones beneath their feet pulled apart like someone had

opened a double door.

A pitfall this time?!

Mina was left speechless by the sudden inky darkness swallowing her feet. Without ground to stand on, her feet treaded temporarily through thin air. Seconds after feeling like time had stopped, gravity pulled them upside down into a free fall.

“KYAAAAAH!”

“WAAAAAAH!”

We’re falling, falling, falling!

Three screams echoed in the dark as they rapidly plummeted. Pitch-black walls whisked past them at dizzying speeds. Thick darkness covered everything below, filling them with the bone-chilling fear of not knowing how long they were going to fall for.

Mina looked up in hopes of finding something to grab onto—only to witness the moment the boulder that had been hot on their tail drop into the pit and zoom past them. Luckily, the weightlessness of falling made it a cinch to dodge the boulder. Though they had literally fallen into a completely different pinch.

Blond tresses whipping behind him, Louis called out to Leo’s back below him, “We can make do if we use a float spell! Can you pull it off, Leo?”

“I’ll make it happen!” Leo held out his right hand and swiftly formed the magic circle, the fall doing nothing to disturb his neat lines.

A gust of wind shot up from below them in response, pillowing their descent and slowly floating them down.

A-Are we going to get out of this alive?!

As they descended like a baby being rocked in a cradle of clouds, the gutter walls on both sides came to an abrupt end and they were spit out of the narrow black hole into a wide clearing. A field of blue flowers spread out below their eyes.

Wow, what is this place?! Mina’s breath was taken away by the unexpectedly beautiful scenery. I can’t believe the bottom floor of the ruins is a flower garden... Though this looks more like a field of wildflowers than a manicured garden.

Mina glanced at Leo and Louis floating on either side of her: they were glaring warily at the flower field.

It’s pretty bizarre for flowers to bloom deep underground like this.

Leo and Louis were more sensitive to magic distortions, giving them a greater awareness of what was off about the uncanny field.

The gust of wind let them off on top of the blue flowers. Mina cupped her hand over her forehead and looked up at the dome ceiling where she saw the gutter exit they had fallen from several dozen floors above. They may have fallen to the deepest dungeon level.

Leo scratched the back of his head as he stared up at the ceiling with her. "Our misfortune may have been luck after all. Doesn't this abnormal space scream we're close to our goal?"

"Certainly feels that way. I thought I was finally going to meet the beautiful Creation Goddess when we fell into the trap pit while being chased by a boulder, but it appears lady luck hasn't forsaken us." Louis adjusted his clothes and continued with a shrug, "On that note, this is quite the uncanny garden. You would never know that a huge flower field existed underneath the ancient ruins..."

"Feels like we've hit the end of the Quest. Anyways, these blue flowers..." Leo bent over and picked a petal off one of the blue flowers at his feet, "...are being forced to bloom with magic. Flowers would never bloom under the ruins like this. Maybe this dungeon's boss has a thing for 'em?"

"Hard to say. The more poisonous the flower the more colorful and eye-catching it becomes. Personally, I think this boss has poor taste."

"Oi, oi. Don't taunt the dungeon's boss," Leo chuckled and scanned the area for life. "Doesn't look like Elias and Aki are nearby."

Mina didn't sense anyone else in the flower field either. There was only the occasional breeze that sent ripples through the flowers.

Where is that breeze coming from? Trivial as that question may seem, it was just one of the many elements that added to the clearing's creepiness.

Mina pulled the map from the pouch at her belt and tried to approximate their current location. "This is about the only place on the map that's this spacious."

Louis looked over at the map and trailed his finger from their location north. "If this is where we are at on the map, we should reach our final destination if we continue north."

"Then why don't we head north while looking for Elias and Aki? They probably stopped to smell the flowers along the way. What a pain," Leo complained, but he was restlessly urging them ahead all the same.

He had mentioned not seeing Elias and Aki for a while; he was probably dying to see them soon. His thoughts had been preoccupied with worry for Aki from the start.

Leo flicked back his robe and marched off ahead of them. Louis fell in line behind him and Mina followed after them, squeezing her hands together in a bid to suppress her impatience.

Elias, Aki, please be safe. I'm coming for you with Leo and Louis!

Chapter 12: The Dark Lord's Agenda

I can't believe I am having such a hard time squashing this fly... Nako looked down at her torn clothing and badly injured body and irritably bit her lower lip. She pressed her right hand to her aching left shoulder, and her palm came away sticky with bright-red blood.

She had been careless. Johann may have been Ivan Clarence's descendant, but she never imagined a mere human child could land a hit on her, much less injure her. So she foolishly believed she could toy with him without getting serious.

How could I have known it would be an even fight?

Nako glared at Johann lying face down near the opposite wall. Rather than cower from a head-on fight against the Lunar Goddess, he boldly struck her down with mighty attack spells. Attack spells not usually in a Priest's wheelhouse.

Squishy humans normally wet their pants in fear of merely standing before a goddess. Fear should've consumed him and wracked his body with the shakes.

Enemies that they were, she still respected his stouthearted bravery that lacked a healthy modicum of fear.

But using the Holy Spear had taken a great toll on his fragile human body.

Johann's magic hit zero before hers did after a long, drawn out battle of throwing spells at each other. And still, he didn't give up. He stopped using his spear as a magic conduit and charged at her with it as a physical weapon—and she had used that opening to pound him down with a lethal ballistic spell that dealt a fatal blow.

Shockwaves had blown him into the wall protected by his barrier, the impact knocking the Holy Spear from his grasp and the air from his lungs. He dropped to the floor unconscious. The winner had been decided.

Nako's eyes lingered on Johann lying lifelessly next to the wall with his head slightly angled toward her. His eyes were shut as he gasped for air. Soot and blood dirtied his beautifully white vestments, and blood dribbled from his partially agape mouth.

She tottered over to him, her legs unsteady with the damage he had inflicted on her, and crouched at the unconscious boy's side. ...*So this boy is Ivan Clarence's spawn, eh?*

Well-acquainted with the Sanctuary's founder back in the day, the Lunar Goddess couldn't help but recall those Creation Era days when she looked at Johann. Those days of peace before the world's Creation Energy went out of whack were her prized memories.

Were it possible, she would happily give up everything to return

to that time. However, once something is lost it can never again take on the same shape. Those irreplaceable days and the man who had loved her would never again be hers.

That was the reason why. Why she couldn't leave the world he loved in this despicable state.

By annihilating this haywire world with her own hands, she would be protecting his dreams. She believed that was the only way she could atone for what she did.

Nako scooped Johann's silver hair into her bruised hand. His beautiful tresses feebly spilled through her fingers.

"...Seems like such a waste to end your life," she whispered.

Nevertheless, solely being Ivan's spawn made him her enemy, and she would eventually have to eliminate him as a member of the Hero Party, anyway. Even if she had no personal grief with him, she didn't have a reason to let someone she had to kill live another day.

Nako shut her eyes, blocking out memories of a happier life. When she opened them again, they filled with the icy layer covering the moon as she looked down at him. She swung her right hand up and thin tendrils of light formed around her fingertips, transforming into icicles.

"You shouldn't feel much pain while unconscious. Farewell, Johann Clarence." With her final word, she aimed the light icicle at his heart.

All of a sudden, the barrier behind Johann shattered, and a man with dark green hair appeared from a pitch-black rift.

Witnessing Nako about to slam her magic icicle into Johann's chest, the man promptly swiped his hand to the side. The shockwaves born from that movement blasted Nako's icicles away.

"Kya...!" she cried out, holding her hand numbed from the magic backlash against her chest.

The man surely held back—his attack left her otherwise uninjured. Clasping her tingling hand, she glared up at him from under her lashes. He stared down at her with eyes redder than freshly spilled blood.

"...So you showed up, after all. Stop using Nako's body as you please," he commanded in a deep baritone suited for ordering around legions of soldiers.

"...Dark Lord..."

He's finally here. The Lunar Goddess internally gave up the fight. She couldn't use the girl's body any longer now that he had run to her aid. *Looks like time's up.*

Nako held up both hands and rose to her feet, taking a step back from the unconscious boy at her feet. She haughtily angled her chin in the air and elegantly flipped her hair over her shoulder.

“You’re surprisingly late. You may have very well lost this girl forever if Johann Clarence hadn’t been here. Growing careless, are we?” she goaded him.

The Dark Lord stared impassively back at her. “You were equally careless... You look like you’re teetering on the edge of defeat. It’s a testament to the boy’s skill that he carefully avoided inflicting any life-threatening injuries,” he stated, unconcerned.

Nako took another look at her body. The only reason she wasn’t fatally wounded was because Johann used spells that wouldn’t permanently harm the girl. From the start, the Lunar Goddess knew he couldn’t fight her seriously as long as she used the girl’s body as a shield.

Looking at it in that light, he had been fighting at a great disadvantage, yet he still managed to buy time until the Dark Lord showed up. Fearsome child.

...Very well. I shall withdraw today in deference to Johann Clarence’s good fight. Besides, I’m not foolish enough to challenge the world’s strongest magic wielder in this damaged body.

Thin smile on her lips, Nako submissively spread her arms, accepting defeat. “Dark Lord, you can have the girl’s body back this time. It would be ill-advised for even me to take you on here.”

“...A wise choice. A temporary truce it is, then. Next we meet, I will bring forth all my forces and power to confront you.” The Dark Lord cast a glance at Johann.

He probably meant he would make an ally of the boy by then.

Gathering all the Holy Relic wielders to his side would certainly make them a force to reckon with, even for a Goddess such as me.

The Holy Relics she remembered were: the Hero’s Holy Sword, the Dark Lord’s Holy Garments, Ivan Clarence’s Holy Spear, and the Holy Dagger Ivan bestowed upon his best friend, Lenard. It was unclear who possessed the dagger now.

Even she had to honestly admit that it’d be a hard fight against all the Holy Relic wielders, but she was the one who had bestowed the weapons upon humanity in the first place. She wouldn’t be easily defeated by her own creations.

Nako tilted her head and flashed a confident smile. “I see. I look forward to it. Build up as much power as you can until then,” she said, closing her eyes.

The Dark Lord held his index finger out to her. The crimson gemstone ring on Nako’s ring finger radiated a bloody glow in resonance with his magic. As if on cue, all the strength left Nako’s unresisting body, and she slowly crumbled. The Dark Lord dashed over and held her up in his arms.

Nako’s small body weakly nestled against his chest. He solemnly

looked down at her and apologized. “Nako, I’m sorry. I came too late. Your suffering is over now.”

Sweat beaded her forehead after the moon crest vanished. Small cuts covered her body, but thanks to Johann’s deliberate avoidance of her vitals, she wasn’t in danger of bleeding out.

The Dark Lord Kerdes lifted her into his arms, and barely moving his lips, chanted the ancient magic words. Faint silver light wrapped around her, instantly healing all her injuries. He then knelt beside the unconscious Priest. “...You fought well. Most unexpected.”

He genuinely didn’t expect Johann to take on the Goddess alone, much less wound her in a fight to the bitter end. Maybe he should have had higher expectations of Ivan Clarence’s descendant, and the Hero’s chosen Priest.

Freely wielding the Holy Spear at his age proved he had remarkable talent.

Kerdes held his hand over Johann’s forehead and healed him instantly. His tensed expression eased once he stopped losing blood.

“You fought hard to protect Nako. Thank you. You have my gratitude.”

Johann’s ocean blue eyes flickered open and looked blankly at the Dark Lord as if awoken by his sincere expression of gratitude. “Where...what happened...?”

“Johann Clarence.” Saying his name snapped him out of his stupor.

Johann shoved himself upright, but the motion was too jarring in his state; he slammed a hand down to stop from pitching forward.

Kerdes softened his aura to calm the boy. “Take it slow. I healed your external wounds, but your fatigue remains.”

“...Are you,” he took a breath, “the Dark Lord?”

Kerdes nodded in confirmation.

A small smile graced the boy’s lips as if he were actually relieved to be sitting face to face with his enemy. “...I see. Then I successfully bought time until your arrival,” he breathed with the relief of a man who had accomplished his mission in life.

His eyes fell on Nako sleeping safely in the Dark Lord’s arms, bringing a rare tranquil smile to his face. Weakly smiling with that ghostly white face of his revealed just how mentally and physical exhausted he was. It was painful to look at.

Is he relieved to see Nako safe even after he risked his life and sustained heavy injuries because of her?

Kerdes casually dipped his head in reverence to the boy’s kindness. “You did everything in your power, even putting your life on the line, to save Nako. The Hero has fine allies.”

Johann weakly shook his head. “No, I do not deserve to be

considered Elias's ally..." He paused, then changed the topic. "You healed me as well. Thank you."

"You needn't thank me. If anything, it is my carelessness that brought this pain upon you. I'm sorry."

Johann gave his head another shake.

Some of the tension left Kerdes with how calmly Johann conversed with him. Judging by the way the boy hadn't pestered him with a million questions despite the baffling circumstances, the Sanctuary had filled him—one of their High Priests—in on most details pertaining to the Lunar Goddess.

Kerdes was relieved to find Johann shared the same knowledge as him.

Conflicted over how to breach the next topic, Johann threw aside his hesitation and looked Kerdes straight in the eye. "Dark Lord, please answer me this: why did you allow Nako to leave your side? You knew Nako housed the Lunar Goddess's soul within her and preemptively sealed her personality with a ring imbued with your magic. As the man who did all of that, you must have known the Goddess would leap at the chance to take over her when you let Nako out of range of your magic."

Blame didn't fill his tone. He seemed to be genuinely seeking the answer to his question.

"...A fair question." Kerdes hesitated a moment before picking his words. "I had two reasons. The first was to show your Hero Party that I am not your enemy. Going directly to the Hero to express that sentiment risked triggering unnecessary conflict. So I set the stage for Nako to take the mirror to you."

"You set the stage?" Johann puzzled his brow. "You and Nako have built a relationship of trust. She would have gladly cooperated with any plan of yours if you had explained it to her. Why go about it in a convoluted manner just to send her alone?"

"Because..." Kerdes trailed off, that confession too embarrassing even for him to make. He bashfully shifted his gaze out the window. "...I wanted to let Nako see her older sister."

"Pardon?"

"Nako has been longing to see her sister ever since she came to this world. She hated worrying her sister. And a piece of her was lonely. But if I went with Nako to meet her sister? My presence would only worsen the situation and prevent them from speaking openly. Thus, I sent Nako on her own. That is my second reason."

Everything he had done, he did it thinking of Nako. To his great regret, his actions allowed the Goddess a step closer to her ambitions, producing the exact opposite result from what he had desired.

He should've gone with Nako even if it meant things wouldn't go

as smoothly as hoped. In the end, his choice resulted in Nako's suffering and Johann, the Hero's dear friend and ally, being injured.

Tormented by his lack of foresight, Kerdes sank his fangs into his lower lip. Oddly enough, Johann laughed. Kerdes's brow creased with confusion at the boy's amusement.

"...Why do you laugh?"

"Pardon my rudeness. I had always wondered how cruel and coldhearted the Dark Lord who incited fear throughout the world would be, but you appear to be kinder than most humans," Johann remarked without malice.

"I'm no kinder than most. And, for that matter, the world only views the Dark Lord as a hateful villain because of the crafty way Sanctuary has manipulated the masses."

"I can't deny that..." Johann winced.

The Dark Lord is a villain out to destroy the world—spreading such a venomous lie was necessary to hide Ivan Clarence's grave digression from the world and to give a valid reason for the Hero and Dark Lord to fight to the death.

After all, a hero couldn't exist without a villain.

Hero and Dark Lord had to fight in order to inject the world with fresh Creation Energy. But the Sanctuary wanted to keep that a secret from the masses at all costs. Ivan Clarence's heinous sin had caused the problem they were solving, after all.

By giving the Hero and Dark Lord's battle an epic background story such as "the legendary hero must defeat the villain out to destroy the world," they obscured the true reason why these two powerful beings had to fight every couple of decades while making it sound meaningful. Thus, they skillfully turned the world's eyes away from the truth and their crimes.

As the Dark Lord, Kerdes took umbrage with the unfair disadvantage placed on him since birth, but he, and all the Dark Lords before him, had grudgingly come to terms with their fate as long as they could replenish the world's energy without the masses getting in the way.

Such was the mission that befell the one born as Dark Lord.

The circumstances and crimes stemmed back millennia before the young Priest was born, they were not his fault, yet he apologized as if he had committed them. He was too serious and righteous for his own good.

Johann came across as very mature for his age because of the burdens he shouldered, but he actually possessed an honesty in line with his twenty years.

Kerdes's lips curved up slightly as he shook his head. "I shouldn't have to tell you this, but you aren't to blame. Moreover, both myself

and the successive generations of Dark Lord are honored to die for the world. You think too much about others. No wonder you can't do anything when you let yourself be torn between the Sanctuary's will and the Hero Party you call friends."

"That is not—no, you are absolutely right." Johann switched from denial to facing the truth, bringing another faint smile to Kerdes.

Hero Elias has fine allies, after all.

Johann's sincere struggle between being there for Elias and serving in the role expected of him as the Pope's son was apparent just by talking to him.

Both the Hero and Kerdes desperately needed someone like him who could be the bridge between the Hero and Sanctuary. Even if he couldn't make the decision now, Kerdes hoped he would someday choose to side with them.

Kerdes looked straight at the boy who kept his eyes trained on the ground. "Hero Elias needs you," he encouraged. "Strange as this request may sound from me, please be there for the Hero. And someday, become my ally as well." His lips drew a fearless smirk.

Hero and Dark Lord will join forces to put an end to the Lunar Goddess's wicked agenda.

Struck off guard, Johann's eyes went wider than the moon. He lowered his head, seemingly working through what was implied there.

"...I will remember what you said here today."

Satisfied with his response, Kerdes stood, adjusting Nako in his arms. "That is more than enough for today. I am going to return with Nako now. Can you tell the Hero that I will be waiting for him at the Dark Lord's castle?"

"I will deliver your message." Johann gripped the transference mirror carefully tucked away in his vestments.

Kerdes gazed fondly upon it. One look and he knew that it had been powered with more than enough magic to send them to his castle. Likely the fruit of Johann and the Hero Party Mage, Leo Gaines's, efforts.

Leo Gaines... Dark Lord Kerdes recalled a distant memory of that young lad with jet-black hair. He was one of the few people Kerdes loved dearly. *He probably has no memory of me, but he's my—*

Kerdes turned his back toward Johann and asked about Leo as if he had casually remembered the Mage. "Speaking of the Hero Party, is Leo well?"

"You want to know about...Leo?"

Kerdes sensed Johann's surprise behind him. Perhaps his question came across as abrupt and disconnected from the rest of their conversation.

He gave his head a shake, thinking better of it, and decided not

to wait for Johann's answer.

I shouldn't have asked. It only serves to confuse Johann and lets it slip that I'm concerned about Leo.

"Never mind. Forget I asked." Kerdes gazed into dark space and activated his magic to teleport. The space before him ripped open and a black swirling hole welcomed him.

He was about to step through the rift when Johann called out to his back. "Please wait! He's—Leo is well! He left to find Elias and Aki. He will come back once he has them."

"I see," Kerdes said in a purposely disinterested tone, all the while his lips spread in an overjoyed smile. "That is good to hear."

I am happy as long as he is well.

Wiping the smile from his face, Kerdes glanced at Johann over his shoulder. "I look forward to reuniting with you at my castle."

Burning Johann's firm nod into his memory, Kerdes disappeared through the rift to his castle with Nako, his heart leaping with excitement for the day the Hero and Dark Lord Parties would meet all together.

Chapter 13: Who am I? Shadow Tribe Badass, Y'all!

AKI approached the subterranean lake hand in hand with Elias and peered into the rippling depths at her feet. She could perfectly make out the rocky bottom through the crystal clear waters despite the lack of any visible current.

I wonder if there are any fish... Hopeful, she searched the pool of water, but nothing moved inside. *Maybe it's empty.*

Disappointed, she leaned further over the edge. Elias suddenly yanked her back, nearly causing her to fall over.

"Whoa! Wh-What's wrong, Elias?" She looked back at him, her arm still locked in his hand. His emerald eyes sharply narrowed on the opposite side of the lake.

"Aki, look...!" he warned in a hushed voice.

"At what...?"

Aki rebalanced herself before following the trajectory of Elias's gaze across the lake—and gasped when someone appeared out of thin air.

A tall hooded figure hidden under black robes stood on the tips of their toes on top of the water. On a second look, they appeared to be hovering over the center of the lake rather than standing directly on it.

The cloaked figure turned their hooded face toward Aki and their perfectly shaped lips turned up in a fanged sneer. "How nice of you to show up, Sir Hero, Lady Right-hand. Finally made it, huh? I was gettin' damn sick of waitin'." They spoke so frankly it shattered some of the wariness built up by the mystical grounds they were surrounded by. The playful voice sounded like a man's.



He makes it sound like he was waiting for us, but who is he? Maybe we'd know if he showed his face.

The man shrugged and voluntarily pulled down his hood as if he had read Aki's mind. Short red hair cut to fall in layers stood out starkly against his black robes, and his thin, sharply angled dull green eyes twinkled with amusement.

He had a breathtakingly handsome face, although not one she recognized. Pointed ears poked out from under his hair, and while shorter than the Dark Lord's, they created an instant connection between the two.

Could he be—

"...Are you a Shadow Tribesman?" Elias asked in her place, not hiding his surprise at the man's unusual appearance.

The Shadow Tribe was a species with a greater capacity for magic than humanity, and they had legions of magical beasts at their command. Generations of Dark Lords had come from their ranks, and the current Dark Lord served as their leader.

Louis had said their overall population was so small few humans had ever laid eyes on them.

And now one of the few have appeared before us?!

The Shadow Tribesman flashed a welcoming grin, putting some of his fangs on display. "Bingooo! You guessed it. I'm the badass Shadow Tribesman, Jent Sutcliff. I'm the robed fella who slipped the Quest sheet over to that perky redheaded Thief in a plot to lure Heroboy and the gang here," the young Shadow Tribesman cheerfully bragged while stretching over the water.

Perky redheaded Thief? He's talking about Mina.

If he was telling the truth, they had come to this dungeon in response to his summons. Mina had mentioned sensing unfathomable magic from the robed man she had received the Quest from.

Putting all that aside, this man acted so casually he smashed the mysterious and supernatural image Aki had formed about the Shadow Tribe.

Dark Lord Kerdes fit the bill for what she had imagined, but perhaps the Shadow Tribe was filled with all sorts of unique personalities, including Sutcliff's frivolous one.

Just as Aki was assessing him, Sutcliff's eyes traveled the length of her body.

"Ho-ho, so this fine dame is His Greatness's little Nako's big sis, huuuh? Spunk runs in the family, I see. Nice. Very nice. Hotties for the win. Big sisters are totally my typeee," he drawled and winked.

"Ick." Aki shuddered. She wasn't the least bit happy about being his type.

Ticked off, Elias stepped forward, protecting her with his broad

back. “Sorry, but can you cut to the chase? You didn’t lure me this far underground just to hit on my Right-hand. I assumed the Shadow Tribe was behind this odd Quest. What business do you have with me?” Elias asked in a barbed voice.

Sutcliff mockingly threw up his hands like Elias had him at an impasse. “Oooh, sooo scary! I’m shaking in my awesome and stylish boots under the Hero’s mighty glare! ...You’re right. I wasted my time picking flower petals in this dank and damp place because I wanted to hand something over to the great Hero.”

“You want to give Elias something?” Aki asked.

“Yeppers. Mister Lord Dark Lord asked me to.” Sutcliff snapped his fingers as if he were performing a magic trick. An ancient book with a rouge leather spine appeared above his gloved hand. He snatched the book out of the air and rapped it against his shoulder. “This bad boy right here is a nifty copy of the Book of Creation—an invaluable text containing the secrets of this world. I was asked to deliver this to Heroboy there. Sounds like it’s choooooock-full of knowledge you need to have.”

For all he praised it for being an invaluable book, Sutcliff was playing with that sacred text like a schoolboy might his dreaded math textbook. Was that another extension of his carefree personality?

Wouldn’t the Dark Lord be upset if he saw? As Aki was pointlessly worrying over their enemy, Elias held out his hand to accept the book.

“I just have to accept that Book of Creation to clear the Quest, right? I need to get back to my friends and head straight to the Dark Lord’s Castle. Hurry and hand it ove—” Before Elias finished speaking, Sutcliff vanished into thin air as if he had been a mirage.

Where did he go?

Sutcliff’s tall shadow suddenly appeared behind Aki as she darted her eyes around the field in search of him.

Oh no!

“But I don’t wannaaa. What kinda Quest boss would I be if I handed it over when you asked? Mister Lord Dark Lord told me I can only hand it over once Heroboy awakens those super magical hidden powers sleeping within, y’know? So I’ll be borrowin’ the little lady till then!”

Sutcliff, who had appeared so close to Aki she felt his breath on her neck, wrapped his arm around her waist, and in one movement, leapt ten feet away from Elias. He darted to one of the enormous rock mountains dotting the flower field and hopped up the mammoth-sized boulders with the agility of a magical cat. Once at the top, he sat down and placed Aki on his lap.

Wh-What just happened? Dazed by her sudden kidnapping, Aki scrambled from his lap, but his sinewy arm shot out and curled

around her waist, tugging her back in place.

“Wh-Wh-Wha-What are you doing?!” she stammered. “Let go of me this instant!”

How did things suddenly turn out this way? What’s he planning to do with me? Beating her fists against Sutcliff’s chest, Aki looked for Elias over her shoulder. She spotted his blond hair at the bottom of the rock mountain, a good distance away from how small he appeared.

Sutcliff had quickly carried her to the top of a mountain several stories tall. His catlike maneuvers proved he possessed the defining inhuman strength of the Shadow Tribe members.

Realizing she wouldn’t get anywhere with physical resistance, Aki tried persuading the man holding her instead. “Excuse me! What is Elias’s latent power?! What good does this do you—”

“ACK! Can you quit yapping so loudly next to my cute little sensitive earsss? What’s your name, little Nako’s big sis?”

“Eh? I-It’s Aki...” she said out of habit, then berated herself for honestly answering him. “Hey! Now’s not the time for friendly introductions!” she shouted at him, her face flushed from the shame she felt.

Sutcliff’s chest shook with a deep chuckle, his sickeningly handsome face breaking out in a great big grin. “You’re sooo cute and honest, Aki-pie. I can, like, totally understand why Heroboy fell for you. You’ve got the hots for her, don’t ya, Heroboy?” he taunted, twirling a lock of Aki’s hair in his fingers.

“Let go of her! Lay one more finger on her and—I will make you regret it,” Elias uttered in the deepest, quietest voice; it conveyed that his anger ran deep.

He glared at Sutcliff with eyes so frigid they overtook his usual gentleness. Those were the same wintry eyes Aki saw when he dealt with Princess Carolina.

The naked blade of his drawn Holy Sword reflected the blue glow radiating from the flowers blooming around him, blinding Aki even at a distance.

Sutcliff’s lips curled up with his bemusement at Elias’s silent rage. “You’ll make me regret it... Very nice. Raw passion like that’s necessary to awaken your powers. Kidnapping Aki-pie here was the right choice. Go meee. What Heroboy is most attached to right now isn’t his role as Hero or saving the world—it’s you, Aki-pie. You and you alone.”

Sutcliff lifted Aki’s chin up with his long fingernail. His sharply angled eyes devoured hers from a breath’s distance. What was it about Shadow Tribe eyes and gleaming with truculence? His eyes flashed like a mischievous boy about to pull a naughty prank.

“P-Please stop...!”

Sutcliff seized her wrist before her right hook could reach him. Aki tried to yank her fist away, but it remained locked firmly in his clutch. His slender arms were stronger than they appeared.

“Can’t help you there, cutie. Say, Aki-pie, you’ve already made out with Heroboy, yeah?”

“...HUH?” Shock over his ridiculously timed question temporarily outdid the fear coursing through her.

Why did she have to be asked about her love life under these trying circumstances? She had no reason to answer him. Besides, she didn’t even know the intent behind the question.

Baffled, she fell silent with a splash of red on her cheeks. Sutcliff nodded as if that answered it.

“I see, I seeeee. You’ve already made ouuut. Good, good. Then it’s of little significance if I kiss you once, yeah?”

“Wh-What are you—mmph!”

Sutcliff covered her partially open lips with his before she could finish objecting. Aki froze, eyes wide, unable to push him away as she felt him on her.

Amusement sparkled in his dull green eyes over the fear staring back at him.

What’s happening...? Shock and confusion stopped her brain.

What is he doing to me right now? Why is someone I only just met touching me? Indescribable guilt surged from the pit of her belly. Nothing was more despicable than letting Elias see her being touched by another man. She felt like she had just been defiled in a single instant. *No, I don’t want this...I don’t! Stop it! Let me go!*

Aki placed both hands on his chest and pushed with all her strength to get away. He didn’t move even a millimeter before her feeble strength as a low level Archer.

Tears sprung to her eyes as his lips remained on hers.

Vexed, horrified, mortified, and angry, yet unable to run away, she slammed her eyes shut and hoped it’d be over with fast. Except, she tasted a bitter liquid passing through Sutcliff’s mouth into her own.

After trying to fight against the liquid filling her whole mouth for a minute without success, she gagged and accidentally swallowed it.

He just made me drink something?! Pain oozed through her veins with the burning liquid. *I suddenly feel tired...*

The liquid was definitely more than spit or water. From the pain and numbness spreading through her, she guessed it was some kind of poison.

Was that what he was after all along? That’s why he kidnapped and forced his lips on me.

I hate this. Why can’t I ever do anything other than drag Elias down?

Aki thought learning to use the bow and arrow would make her stronger. Make her someone who could fight alongside her fellow party members.

But they truly were from different worlds, both literally and figuratively. No matter how hard she tried to catch up to her party, she would always be a hundred levels behind.

Did she, a weakling from Earth, deserve to call herself Elias's girlfriend?

Would there forever be obstacles in their way preventing them from being together?

Mind growing duller from the searing pain, she glared at Sutcliff through blurring vision. Lips raised in an intrepid smirk, he watched her every moment of suffering

Nearing her limits for holding on, she started falling backward. Sutcliff wrapped an arm around her back, his touch as gentle as if she were a precious porcelain doll he didn't want to fall and shatter before he was finished with her.

"Don't you...dare...touch me..." she seethed with what little energy she had left. No longer could she physically resist him.

"Aki...! Bastard! Let go of her!"

She heard Elias's enraged roar and the sound of his boots pounding against the ground as he ran for her.

Elias, I'm sorry. I'm always, always, always being rescued by you.

Am I really capable of supporting him as his girlfriend? Can I protect him and the heavy burden he shoulders when I can't even protect myself? I'm so pathetic I could cry. But I'm fed up with myself for only ever being able to cry.

I want to become stronger. Strong enough not to be ashamed to stand beside Elias as the Hero's Right-hand.

With that hope etched into her heart, Aki lost consciousness in Sutcliff's arms.

Chapter 14: Awakening

ELIAS nearly lost his mind watching as the most important person in the world to him limply fell over in Sutcliff's arms. It was as if someone had trampled on his most prized possession with muddy feet.

Aki was the first person to ever need Elias, not as the Hero but as an individual. In turn, she had become precious to him, his greatest treasure, and the love of his life he wanted to protect from others.

Yet for all that, his failure to act fast enough led to her being kidnapped and harmed by the Shadow Tribesman.

...I have never felt such violent emotion before.

The Hero must be calm and collected at all times. The Hero must never be swayed by their emotions. Having been raised religiously on that mantra, he should've never become attached to anything. He should've been incapable of emotion.

"BASTARD! RELEASE HER!" Roaring with his mounting rage, Elias charged toward Sutcliff with his drawn Holy Sword.

By the way Aki had lost consciousness, the man must've done something to her through their connected lips. Did he use magic? Or did he force feed her something?

"Don't tell me you... YOU made her drink POISON?!" Elias bellowed the conclusion he came to.

Sutcliff sneered on top of the mountain of boulders. "Yeppity yep! Bingooo! You're so goooood at guessing games, Heroboy. If you don't pick up the pace your precious Aki-pie might die, y'know?" He tilted up Aki's chin. She couldn't fight him now that she was unconscious.

STOP IT! Don't touch her!

Sutcliff thrust his finger at Elias who was running faster than the wind to get to him. "Oooh, stop right there. I can't let her rescuuueee be that easy on you, now can I? Why don't you play with this guy first, Heroboy?" He rubbed his thumb against his index finger and snapped them together.

A cloud of dust exploded in front of Elias, choking him, and a huge black shadow rose within it.

It's huge! What in the blue blazes did he just summon?! The top of it nearly reaches the domed ceiling!

Elias stopped his forward charge and swept the Holy Sword in front of him, scattering the dust obstructing his view and revealing the full form of the giant hiding within.

A snake?

A grotesque monster loomed above him. Nine entangled serpent heads stared down at him from atop a dinosaur's torso with clawed

hindlegs and forelegs. At a glance, he knew he wasn't dealing with a monster, but a high level Magical Beast.

Once the dust cleared, the nine heads bared their fangs and snapped at Elias.

I should've guessed a Shadow Tribesman would have a powerful Magical Beast or two at his disposal.

Sutcliff possessed the necessary level and magic to tame an S-class serpent. Not an easy beast to take on alone, but Elias couldn't let it stop him. He cast a glance at Aki locked in Sutcliff's grip behind the giant serpent standing in his way.

Even from this distance, he could tell her face was rapidly losing all color as she dangled lifelessly in her kidnapper's arms. Her life hung precariously in the balance. He needed to get the antidote to her ASAP. Unlike the Hero, Aki hadn't been introduced to poisons and toxins her whole life. She had no resistance built up, and her level was too low to give her any bonuses.

Elias held the Holy Sword reverently in front of his face. He closed his eyes, exhaled, and kicked off the ground at the speed of a shooting arrow.

One of the nine heads swerved to take a bite out of him before the rest. He leapt aside, nimbly avoiding its venomous fangs. Raising the Holy Sword in position, he struck the neck of the snake from the side.

Green blood unique to Magical Beasts erupted from its neck. The giant serpent squirmed from the unbearable pain, and the eight remaining heads turned to see they had lost one.

One down! Eight to go!

The moment Elias fixed his eyes on the demonic serpent, the cross section of the neck without a head shined, and two new heads grew.

Elias stared on in disbelief. "Self-regeneration?!"

"Ding, ding, ding! Little sssnaky-poo here has this naaasty ability to grow two heads for every one you lob off. Tick-tock, tick-tock. Heroboy, if you dawdle playing with snakes in the fields you'll lose Aki-pie." Sutcliff hugged Aki extra close for show.

A nasty ability is right. Elias scowled. I can't let it slow me down now. Regeneration is nothing. I just have to chop it into a million little pieces so that it can't keep up. Aiming for the torso before the heads should deal more damage.

Years of battle experience told him harming the torso would weaken its regenerative capabilities. Elias expelled the air in his lungs to calm his mind. Then he silently changed his grip on the Holy Sword.

This is an opponent I can defeat if I remain calm.

Sutcliff ran his fingers through his hair as if displeased with Elias's choice of strategy. "Uh-uh, that's not it. That's not what I'm looking for, Heroboy. Taking it down all calm and collected kinda voids the point, y'know? Uggh, now I hafta come up with another plan."

What's he rambling about? Suspicion creased Elias's brow.

Sutcliff crisply snapped his fingers and a wickedly sharp dagger appeared in his hand.

Nothing good could come of that. What did he plan to use that dagger for?

"...I need you to be more panicked, more desperate, more miserable, for this to work. It's only when you're driven to the edge with no way out that the powers sleeping deep within you will surface." Sutcliff fleered and ran his red tongue along the dagger's gleaming blade. He cupped his left hand under Aki's lolling head, lifting her face into view.

"What the hell are doing?!" Elias thundered, accidentally letting his emotions get the better of him.

Sutcliff's green eyes flashed. "Yes. Yessss. That's what I'm talking about, Heroboy. Aki's really the best tool to get to you. Go figure. It's always the girl, isn't it?"

Elias wanted to race to her side, but the giant serpent whipped its serrated tail against the ground in front of him, dashing away his single-minded emotion. He gnawed his lower lip, drawing another derisive smirk from the Shadow Tribesman who reveled in his every miserable reaction.

Sutcliff brought the bare dagger blade closer to Aki's defenseless cheek.

Sickening sweat poured down Elias's temples. *He wouldn't!*

"STOP! DON'T HURT HER!" Elias's plea fell on deaf ears as Sutcliff pressed the blade against Aki's cheek and quickly slid it along her delicate skin, slicing through flesh like butter. Blood spouted from the thin slice and spilled down her snow white cheek.

"Ow...!" Aki moaned, her face contorting with the pain that forced her awake.

Her blood dripped down the silver blade, outlining it in red. Ecstasy glimmered in Sutcliff's eyes riveted on the trickling blood before he juttet out his chin and looked down his nose at Elias.

"Did that do the trick? Feel like you're 'bout to blow your top, Heroooboy? The despair of watching the person you love get sliced up in front of you is all consuming, yeah? Unless, maybe, you're into watching her suffer? Don't ya worry, I ain't stopping here." Cruel intentions flashed in his eyes. He tossed the dagger into the air, caught it in the reverse position, and held it a foot above Aki's right shoulder.

Elias's eyes bulged from his head. "Wait. Please... Please! Don't do this...!"

Imagining the horrific scene to follow, Elias burst into a run at such a speed he nearly tripped over his own legs.

Sutcliff swung down the dagger—the sharp tip glinting as it whisked toward Aki—in slow motion.

All ten snake heads lashed out at Elias. But their vicious bites meant nothing in this moment.

"AKI—!" Before his outstretched hand Sutcliff's raised dagger slammed down into her slender shoulder.

"...Ghh! UWAAAAAAAAAH!"

Fresh blood sprayed from the hole ripped open by the blade. Aki screamed in agony. Forced awake, her eyes flew open and her whole body shuddered from the burning pain.

"Aki! Stop! Please! Don't!"

Please don't...make her suffer anymore...!

Elias's tormented wail turned Sutcliff's lips up in sheer delight. He pulled Aki, her eyes dulled with pain, against his chest and licked the blood off her cheek.

"Ah...ahh..." Tears gushed from her anguished eyes.

Watching on in horror, Elias froze where he was, despite the ten snake heads snapping at him. Indescribable rage wracked his body from the inside out. He was enraged at Sutcliff for hurting her. But the greatest source of the feverish fury escalating within was his weak, worthless self for failing to protect the one person he allowed himself to care for.

"Where should I aim for next? Any part of her you want carved off? How 'bout her left fooot?"

Witnessing Sutcliff about to bring the dagger down on the gasping Aki made Elias's blood boil.

My body burns. My forehead feels like it's on fire. Just like when we entered these ruins and I stopped them from resonating with Aki.

"...Let go," he growled. "Let go of her...!"

A mighty power capable of tearing him apart from the inside out rose from his core. Some sort of ferocious monster was stirring to life inside him.

I can't...control it. It's consuming my awareness. Some unknown power is taking control of me!

"Eli...as..."

Through his fading awareness he vividly heard Aki's feeble voice and saw her weakly reach out for him.

Sutcliff knocked her to the ground, straddled her legs, and raised the dagger over her left thigh.

"Alrighty, you'd better awaken with this one, Heroboy!"

He's going to slam that glinting dagger into Aki!

"STOP! STOPPPPPPPPPPPPPPP!"

Burning pain seared his forehead in direct response to his fury, and together with the intense pain, light bright enough to illuminate the entire underground field flashed from him. Platinum light spread from his hands clutched around the Holy Sword, spreading from the handle to the tip. Surging power broke free of his body and released to the surface.

Tremendous power overflowed from within him in correspondence to his weakening self-awareness. The hot lump of energy solidifying in his chest left him feeling only the pain of being torn asunder.

...It's no use. I can't hold on to my sanity any longer...!

The power called forth by his unbridled rage numbed his heart, stopped his mind, and left only the feverish heat in control of his body. Everything was growing distant. Aki, Sutcliffe, and his sense of self.

Through his rapidly fading consciousness, Elias reached for Aki.

Aki...I'm coming for you...right now.

I swear I will protect you...from everyone who can possibly harm you...!

Chapter 15: Loss

I pulled it off...I think, Mister Lord Dark Lord.

Sutcliff stopped the dagger inches from Aki's thigh and hopped off of her. Then he took a moment to assess the damage he had inflicted on her fragile frame.

The woman lay face up on the ground, blood flowing from the slice in her cheek and the stab wound in her shoulder, her face withdrawn and deathly pale from the poison he forced down her throat.

Sutcliff inconspicuously bit the inside of his cheek over the sorry state he had put her in.

...I definitely went too far to get the job done.

He had been acting on orders from the Dark Lord to awaken the Hero's slumbering powers. The only way to do it was to mentally corner the always composed, nearly emotionless Hero into such emotional turmoil that he would seek out power with all his being.

So Sutcliff used the woman Heroboy loved to get to him. He didn't need to know the Hero to know Elias would look back on this moment and blame his powerless self for failing to protect her, resulting in him growing pessimistic about their relationship and eventually breaking it off.

Meanwhile, Aki would hate herself for being nothing more than Heroboy's weakness.

In short, I just tore the newly formed couple apart. I committed the crime of throwing them back to where they started right after they finally overcame their fears to be together.

I practically stabbed the blade in both their hearts. I'm a real scumbag.

A heavy sigh escaped him. Sutcliff had taken the easiest path to awaken the Hero, but it killed him inside to torment and harass a defenseless woman. Simply remembering her agonized screams made him want to hit himself.

I can never apologize enough, but someday I'll do everything in my power to make it up to her. Healing her wounds is a start. Sutcliff put his hand under Aki's back and helped her into a sitting position.

Awakening Heroboy had been a smashing success. With his primary objective completed, curing the secretary's injuries and poison status took priority. He'd become a true villain if she died on him here.

Sutcliff reached into his robe for the antidote while casting a look at the Hero standing dead still at the giant serpent's feet.

What kind of expression does he have now that he's activated the

Solar Goddess's power?

Hero Elias slowly raised his head as if he heard Sutcliff's silent question. Their eyes locked with the nine-headed serpent between them.

Sutcliff sharply inhaled at the blank facial expression he saw there.

The distinct crest of the Solar Goddess gleaming on his forehead, the Hero vacantly stared at him, not with his clear emerald eyes, but eyes burning gold like the sun. Intelligent life didn't glimmer there, and it was impossible to tell what he was thinking or if he was actually even looking at Sutcliff.

Face utterly devoid of emotion, he merely stared straight ahead. He almost seemed possessed. The Hero's hollow gaze traveled down, locking instantly on Aki. The next second, he robotically raised the Holy Sword without a word or a wrinkle in his deadpan expression.

HOLY CRAP! He's coming! Sutcliff's instincts screamed danger. He switched into a defensive stance with the dagger as his tamed serpent swerved protectively between him and the broken Hero.

Hissing menacingly, the ten heads snaked toward the Hero, snapping their mighty jaws to rip him to pieces.

Not even batting an eyelash, Hero Elias swept his platinum glowing sword to the side as if casually cutting through the wind. Crescent-shaped wind blades blasted forward from his blade and traveled in a straight line faster than the naked eye could follow.

Those platinum blades of light slammed into the magical serpent, severing several heads on impact. Molten black blood spurted from the clean cuts as the cruelly severed heads dropped onto the flower field and rolled into the lake with a thud, thud, thud.

Sutcliff's jaw dropped amid the serpent's earsplitting wailing. "Yick. What kinda move is that? Cheater!"

Apparently the Hero was capable of projecting slash attacks from the Holy Sword while manifesting the Solar Goddess's powers. Sutcliff didn't stand a chance against the Hero in close-combat—he was screwed out of this life and the next one now that he was capable of long-distance attacks.

Oi, oi. If I don't give Aki-pie back to Heroboy soon, I ain't gonna survive till my next meal...!

Sensing a real threat to his life, Sutcliff rushed to pop the stopper out of the antidote vial, but before he could finish, he heard a death cry behind him. Shocked by that ear-piercing, ground shaking roar, Sutcliff turned his head.

A scene straight from hell jumped out at him.

The expressionless Hero was slashing at the snake again and again, dropping bits of flesh chopped off by his excessive slices to the

ground in a puddle of gore. Several heads flew with one slash, quickly followed by a second wave that carved into the serpent's torso. Its regeneration couldn't keep up with the damage. The volley of slashes sliced the giant serpent to pieces.

Oi, oi, oi...! Words escaped Sutcliff, his face turning paler by the second as he watched the supposed Hero's brutality.

Heroboy was apathetically cutting the high-level serpent to pieces—he didn't seem to have a shred of the gentle man left in him from before he awakened his powers.

What the hell happened to him?! Did the power drive him mad?!

Holding Aki protectively in his arms, Sutcliff peered over the mountain's ledge. He feared the deranged Hero's indiscriminate attacks might veer off course and accidentally hit her.

I'll try to beg Heroboy for forgiveness first. I accomplished my mission. I don't need to make a greater enemy out of him than I already have. Sutcliff took a deep breath and held Aki out toward Elias as a peace offering.

"Heroboy! You can have Aki-pie back!" he shouted. "I wanna explain myself to ya, so if you could lower your sword—"

Elias slowly walked toward Sutcliff, trampling over the serpent's flesh and guts on the way.

Did he think nothing of the dead? Watching him step through puddles of blood without any visible hesitation instilled Sutcliff with spine-tingling dread.

Hero Elias stopped at the base of the mountain and tilted his head back.

...Yeesh, I've seen rocks more expressive than him. Does he even understand me? Is it possible he lost his mind to his first experience activating the Goddess's earthshattering power?

If he has...if he's not at the helm of his body, it's damn possible Heroboy can't tell the difference between friend or foe.

Say he only drew out those powers to save Aki-pie, and that desire is now pulling the strings while his personality takes a backseat—he's likely to view everyone but her as an enemy who he'll indiscriminately eliminate.

As Sutcliff was dizzily putting the pieces together, Hero Elias raised the Holy Sword without a word of warning.

He's going to send out another wind-cutter attack?! Whoa, whoa! Hold up! Your girlfriend is here too, Heroboy!

By the time he thought, *I've gotta dodge*, it was already too late. Blades of wind burst from his downward swing and cut diagonally through the boulders making up the mountain they were on.

Sutcliff lost his hold on Aki as the ground crumbled beneath them.

"Crap! Aki-pie...!" He couldn't let her fall from this height; it

would kill her even if she wasn't already injured. Feet treading collapsing rocks, he frantically reached for her through the cloud of dust. But she slipped out of his reach and plummeted down with the rockslide. "Aki! Damn it!"

He made up his mind to dive off the side after her, when he saw a flash of platinum out of the corner of his eye.

Heroboy's windcutter attack! Sutcliff was only able to jump out of the way of the blast because of the blessed physical prowess Shadow Tribesmen were born with. Kicking off the top boulder launched him high into the air and he did a single flip before landing on his feet with catlike agility.

Not giving a single look back at Hero Elias and his Right-hand, he bolted across the flower field into the shadows behind another pile of rocks in order to escape the Hero's relentless attacks.

Shit! I don't know what's what anymore! Back pressed against the rocks, Sutcliff slowly exhaled to catch his breath. *I lost sight of Aki. I know I'm who hurt her, but I still failed to heal her injuries and protect her. Damn it all!*

He slammed his fist into the boulder. White dust billowed throughout the field from the rock mountain Hero Elias had destroyed in a single hit, obscuring visibility.

Heroboy has completely lost his mind. Mister Lord Dark Lord didn't say anything about the Hero going berserk because of the Goddess's power. What the hell should I do, Mister Lord Dark Lord?

Though he was essentially reaping the seeds he'd sowed, Sutcliff gazed up at the domed rock ceiling in search of a way out.

I'm gonna end up buried alive in this cavern, no joke.

Getting the Hero to awaken his powers went well enough. But at the rate things were going, they had plummeted the Hero Party into a worse state than if they didn't have access to their true powers.

The Solar Goddess's powers sleeping within the Hero—Sutcliff's mission would be complete when he explained the nature of those powers to the Hero and handed over the Book of Creation.

"How do I knock some sense back into Heroboy? Is the answer written in that raggedy old book?"

Even if it contained the answers, Sutcliff didn't have the time to flip through the pages looking. No telling when the Hero would discover his location and attack him.

Unsettling worry sent his heart slamming against his chest.

Only the mindless Hero, Aki, and Sutcliff were in the underground cavern. And Sutcliff was the only one capable of fighting the Hero.

...Thinking 'bout it ain't gonna get me anywhere. Just gotta do it. Sutcliff drew the crisscrossed daggers from the sword belt hanging

from his waist at his back. *I don't stand a chance of winning against the half-mad Hero, but I can't turn tail and run either.*

At least I've got skill in swords and magic thanks to being born a Shadow Tribesman. Plus, I can summon magical beasts to my aid. I've gotta use these special abilities to my advantage in a fight against the god-class Hero.

I'm the ass who stirred up this mess. I've gotta clean up after myself!

Sutcliff poked his face around the boulder and ran his gaze over the field behind him in search of Hero Elias. Gore of the brutally slain ten-headed serpent colored the blue flower field black, the Hero's windcutter attacks left massive gouges in the ground, and the collapsed rock mountain littered gravel, dirt, and debris everywhere. The magical luminescent garden had become a shadow of its former beauty.

The thick cloud of dust kicked up in the aftermath of the Hero's onslaught gradually cleared, revealing the shadows of two people. Sutcliff scrutinized the shadow he assumed belonged to the Hero.

The shadows belonged to Hero Elias with his sword arm slack at his right side and Aki nestled against his chest with his left arm, her eyes firmly shut. Aki's wounds hadn't been treated nor had he cured her poison status. Much longer in her state and she really was toeing the line between life and death.

But as awesome as I am, I can't get close to Heroboy... How do I save her? Sutcliff racked his brain as he surveyed the area. That's when he heard it—several pairs of feet running in their direction. *Holy summon monster. Someone's here?*

Wary of the newcomers, Sutcliff held his breath, blending inconspicuously into the scenery with his magic.

The only person he could imagine coming to this goddessforsaken cavern other than Heroboy and Aki-pie was the redheaded Thief he gave the Quest to. Did she make it this far following them?

Whoever it was, setting foot on this flower field was the same as forfeiting their lives. Without his mind intact, the Hero was likely to mercilessly attack anyone other than Aki, whether they be friend or foe.

But Sutcliff couldn't leave his hiding place to confirm who had come running to their deaths. He'd be pointlessly throwing away his life if he didn't wait to launch a perfectly timed surprise attack on the Hero.

So he waited and watched with bated breath.

Keeping his back against the rocks, he stole a glance in the direction of the fast footfalls. There he saw a woman—the redheaded Thief—running ahead of two men. He looked past her at the men. His

mouth fell open at who he saw there.

One was a Minstrel with pale blond hair. Likely one of Heroboy's party members. But the other—

“Holy summon monster! What the hell happened here?!” the other man swore at the devastated flower field littered in serpent flesh.

Sutcliff instantly recognized him. *That jet-black hair, those robes, his confident, unwavering purple eyes—no doubt about it, he's Mister Lord Dark Lord's—*

Sutcliff's eyes bulged and he quietly uttered a name meant only for him to hear. “...Master Leo.”

Chapter 16: A Battle Between Best Friends

“**HOLY** summon monster! What the hell happened here?!” Leo was rooted to the spot by the horrifying spectacle before him.

He had heard the roaring avalanche of crumbling rock in the distance while exploring the subterranean flower field with Mina and Louis. He exchanged looks with them before they dashed toward the sound.

They had rushed into a dead end surrounded by sky-high rock walls in the deepest part of the flower garden where a massive underground lake stretched as far as the eye could see.

What should’ve been a beautiful picture of serenity looked more like a horror painting with monster guts and heads scattered about the blue flowers surrounding the lake, crushing their dainty petals and smearing the area in black blood.

Standing perfectly still in the middle of that disaster with his back to the lake and a stone-hard face was Elias, clasping a bloodied, unconscious Aki to his chest.

Faced with such an alarming scene, Leo found his feet sewn to the ground, unable to take a step closer toward his best friend and the girl he loved.

Oi, gimme a break. What went down here? Trying to get a grasp on the situation, he looked to Elias and saw a peculiar, inexplicable crest glowing brighter than the sun on his forehead. *What the heck is that creepy crest? It’s shaped like the sun?*

The crest wasn’t the only strange thing—Elias’s normally gentle emerald eyes gleamed a burning shade of golden yellow. The aura about him felt like it belonged to another person. He was looking straight at them with zero reaction. Something was clearly wrong with him.

Leo glanced back at Mina and Louis running several feet behind him and signaled that something was wrong. Immediately catching on to the oddity surrounding Elias and Aki, they quieted their approach.

Leo held out his right hand, telling them to stay behind him, and took a step forward, the flowers crunching under his boots.

Elias didn’t blink, try to talk to them, or attack.

Is he gaugin’ what we’re gonna do first?

Leo slowly approached Elias one small step at a time, when Aki’s eyelids quivered open in his arms.

“Leo...?” she rasped in a hoarse voice.

“Aki...!”

What a relief! She’s okay...!

Filled with hope, Leo dropped his slow approach and broke into

a run. “Aki, you okay?! We’ve come to help—”

Aki weakly threw up her blood-covered hand and shouted as loud as she could with her hoarse, pain-rattled voice. “Leo! Don’t... come...any closer!”

“...Huh?”

“Elias...isn’t...!”

Before Leo could make out what she said, Elias pulled Aki tight against his chest and lifted the Holy Sword dangling from his right hand. Elias’s placid gaze locked on Leo and Mina and Louis behind him.



Elias, what's wrong with you? Leo stared back in shock. Is he about to attack us? You've gotta be freakin' kidding me!

Unable to accept what was happening right before his eyes, Leo froze midrun. Aki's shaky scream pierced the air as if to kick some sense back into him.

"Elias, don't...!" She frantically grabbed Elias's raised arm, trying to stop him from swinging his sword down. By the way she was acting, she was still in her right mind, but the same couldn't be said for Elias.

The catapulting beat of his heart acting as a warning, Leo loudly asked, "Aki, what's goin' on?! What's wrong with Elias?!"

"I don't know! I don't know why, but Elias isn't in his right mind! He doesn't respond to me no matter how much I talk to him!"

Her voice isn't reaching him? Can he not hear us?

"What's that supposed to mean?! Does it have somethin' to do with that funky crest on his forehead?!" he bellowed. Aki vehemently shook her head.

No point in drowning Aki in questions when she didn't understand what was going on after witnessing the whole sequence of events from beginning to end.

The only thing any of them knew for sure was that Elias wasn't in his right mind. Had he lost his sense of self? Was it best to assume he couldn't tell the difference between friend and foe?

If he doesn't know who we are...is he about to attack us for real right now?! Leo studied Elias, ice dripping from his unreadable eyes as he raised his sword despite Aki yanking on his arm. *I'm screwed!*

Leo tried to run toward Mina and Louis—but he was too late. Elias knocked Aki's hand aside and mightily swung down the Holy Sword as if he were trying to crack the earth in half with it. Platinum wind blades burst forth, slicing through the flowers like a lawnmower as they raced across the field.

Oi, oi, oi! Is this for real?!

Throughout their years of adventuring together, Elias hadn't once unleashed a long-distance attack. Did the crest give him access to magic?

I'd better make sure he doesn't land a direct hit!

Leo thrust his hands out and chanted an incantation so fast it was nearly incomprehensible, summoning thick gusts of wind to create a barrier between him and the incoming attack.

Lunar Magic didn't have any skill trees for barrier creation like Solar Magic did, so Leo was stuck creatively making use of offensive spells as defense. He blocked the slashing blade attack with his wind magic.

Damn! The slashes didn't stop on impact?! It just keeps hittin' my

barrier as if he's actively wailing on it with the Holy Sword!

Sinking his teeth into his lip, he poured his magic into maintaining his barrier against the relentless slashes slowly pushing him backward.

Mina and Louis are behind me! I have to block the attack or it'll hit 'em! Desperate to hold out, he dug his feet in, but he wasn't strong enough. The platinum blades cut through his barrier, knocking him off balance. Recoil from his disrupted spell sent him flying until his back slammed against the blue flowers.

The slashing blades he failed to block flew over his head at torrential speeds.

Crap! Leo sprung to his feet despite his rattled bones. *It's gonna hit the others directly behind me!* He whirled his bruised body toward them.

"Mina, Louis, run!"

"MINA...!"

"KYAAAAAAAAAH!"

Louis's shout and Mina's harrowing scream sliced through the air. The air blades hit them head-on, flinging them hard against a nearby rock mountain. Not stopping there, the platinum blades slashed the rocks to pieces, hailing heavy rubble on top of the pair collapsed on the ground below.

"Mina! Louis!" Leo cried, his panic-stricken voice drowned out by the crash of tumbling rock as he helplessly reached for them.

What the...what did he just do?!

Dirt and gravel kicked up by the collapse gradually settled to the ground, revealing Mina and Louis knocked unconscious under a pile of rocks. Louis had thrown himself on top of Mina to protect her at the last minute.

Leo thought he saw Louis activate a Lunar Magic spell seconds before the blades tore into them. He sincerely hoped the spell deflected the blast enough to protect them from fatal injury.

"—Elias! You bastard!" Leo seethed and shot Elias an unforgiving glare.

The Elias I know would rather die than attack his friends. I'd better think of my opponent as someone other than Elias. I won't hold back.

Leo reached for the dagger sheathed in a leather belt fastened to his right thigh.

I'll just whack the gentleness back into him.

There were some things in the world that magic had no effect on, hence why he always kept a dagger on him, but he never expected to fight Elias with it.

I've trained fairly hard, but I seriously suck at swordsmanship compared to magic. I'm skeptical I can hold my own against Elias...

The hero possessed attack and defense stats unsurpassed by other Adventurers, and his agility outclassed most level hundred monsters. So he wasn't going to leave any openings for Leo to chant a powerful spell capable of dealing massive damage to him. About the only strategy that stood a chance was to blast him with magic after cracking open a hole in his defenses with the dagger.

How many minutes will I last? I really want to avoid an instant KO.

Leo slid the dagger from its leather sheath with his right hand and held it in the reverse grip with his left hand positioned on top of the guard. Then he assessed the enemy before him.

Rescuing Aki from Elias comes first. Her health points might hit zero if I don't heal her injuries soon. But how'd she even get that badly injured in the first place?

Keeping a good distance from Elias, Leo inspected Aki's status. Even from this distance he saw blood streaming from a long slice in her cheek and her clothes soaked red from what seemed like a deep stab wound in her right shoulder.

Who the hell would do that to her? Elias is protecting her like a mad guard dog even in his psychotic state, so he's off the suspect list.

...Did the monster turned into chop suey get her? Where'd it even come from? Was it from the Quest boss? But what's it protecting here?

Leo gave his head a hard shake. Now wasn't the time to speculate. He should only think about rescuing Aki and beating the sweetness back into Elias. He didn't have the room or time to think about anything else—he was about to take on the Hero who had full bragging rights about being the strongest man in the world, comparable only to the Dark Lord.

Holding his dagger behind him in the downward position, Leo bent his knees and propelled himself off the ground. He had to fight his way into grabbing range of Elias if he wanted to rescue Aki.

Elias silently wielded the Holy Sword and waited for Leo to meet him in the middle of the flower field. Leo clenched his teeth in aggravation over Elias's utter lack of expression.

You can't even grimace or cringe or smile before clashing blades with me?

Leo never wanted to fight his friends. Especially not Elias who he'd fought alongside for years and was proud to call his best friend.

Damn it! I'll put an end to this meaningless fight right now! There's nothing sadder than friends battling each other to the death!

Leo stopped running a foot in front of Elias and used the momentum to spring into the air. Elias automatically looked up and held the Holy Sword vertically in front of his face, blocking Leo's incoming dagger with the blade.

The shriek of steel colliding thundered through the domed

clearing, and jarring vibrations from the impact coursed through Leo's arm.

While Leo had brought down his dagger with his full strength and Elias had blocked it with just one hand, Elias remained unfazed.

S-Stupid superhuman strength! Who knew our most reliable ally could become our most dangerous enemy?

Aki squeezed her eyes shut against the sparks flying from their swords as she squirmed to escape Elias's eagle grip on her.

"Elias, let go! Please let me go!" On the verge of tears, she shoved at his chest, trying to break free.

Oddly enough, Elias never once tried to attack Aki. If anything, he appeared to be tenaciously protecting her.

...Is Elias trying to eliminate anyone who comes near Aki? Is that why he only attacked us when we came closer?

Leo pulled back his dagger and jumped several feet away from Elias. He quickly drew the magic circle with his free hand before Elias could close the distance between them.

"Chilling current of water, cut through the silence, and seal off my prey's escape...! Dunk your head in some water and cool off, Elias!" Leo swiped his hand through the magic circle, erasing it. Several pillars of water burst from the lake behind Elias.

Fortunately, water abounded in this cavern. Why not make full use of that advantage?

The pillars combined into a giant water dragon that flew toward Elias like a flash flood. Not expecting an attack from behind, he was swept away by the water dragon and blown into the side of the rock wall.

"...Sorry, Elias."

He might've landed a hit on him, but this measly spell wouldn't even scratch his health points. Didn't amount to more than buying a little time.

Taking the temporary opening for what it was, Leo ran over to help Aki who had fallen free of Elias's iron grip. She had collapsed to her knees on top of the flowers.

Gruesome injuries. She's gasping for air, and blood's trickling from her lips.

When Leo lifted Aki into his arms she broke into a violent coughing fit that ended in her spitting up a small puddle of blood. He watched in horror.

"Aki! You...!"

Her skin has turned gray. Has she been poisoned as well? She won't last long without an antidote!

How did things get this bad? What the hell happened to them while I was away?!

I have to withdraw somewhere out of berserker Elias's range first or I won't be able to heal Aki or get a grasp on this situation. Is there anywhere I can escape to?

Leo's eyes shot to the domed rock ceiling. Darkness covered an area that likely led to the Ancient Ruins on the surface. They had fallen into the underground flower field from there. Returning to the surface seemed like the safest bet against a non-magic user.

Not even superhuman Elias can climb flat rock that's several dozen castles tall...I hope. Resting Aki against his left arm, Leo drew a magic circle in the air in front of him with his right hand.

"Lend me your feathers, bring me to the highest place. Send me up on falcon wings!"

A sudden gust of wind swelled under Leo's feet when he finished chanting his flight spell. He held Aki tight against his chest.

Don't fall, Aki!

Leo jumped on top of that powerful air current. Elias rose mechanically to his feet where the water dragon had blown him against the rock wall, and swung the Holy Sword, directing his platinum wind blades at Leo. The blades curved so that they wouldn't hit Aki.

Well, crap. You're damn persistent! I won't be satisfied until I punch you in the face once you regain your sanity!

Leo leapt with the air current faster than the cutting blades arrived, his thoughts focused on how he could get back at his friend rather than the dire situation he was in. Those killer blades sliced through the rock and flowers he had been standing on a second prior.

Hurry, damn it!

Answering his impatience, the current surged and pushed him and Aki up to the hole in the ceiling with the speed of an erupting volcano. The scenery shifted from the subterranean lake to the narrow confines of the dungeon's gutters with rock walls on all sides. They zoomed through there until they reached the straight path inside the Ancient Ruins where Leo had fallen with Mina and Louis.

Supporting Aki in one arm, Leo placed his other hand on the stone floor and pulled himself up. He immediately laid Aki down on the ground, resting her head on his lap.

Scrubbing roughly at the sweat beading his forehead, he exhaled with fleeting relief.

At least I succeeded in gettin' us outta there... Hopefully we'll stay outta Elias's range for a few minutes. If I'm gonna take him on, I need a couple of seconds to regroup. Should probably call for reinforcements once I heal Aki up...

Mina and Louis were still buried under rocks. They needed help, stat. But who could he ask for help? What in the world did he have to

do to stop Elias in his ballistic mode?

Johann's face cut through the panic slowing the wheels in Leo's brain.

Johann possessed Sanctuary knowledge Leo wasn't privy too. He might have an idea about what was screwing with Elias. Saving Elias might be possible if they knew what caused him to lose his mind.

Leo swiped his fingers through the air and chanted the messenger's spell, crafting a magic message seeking Johann's aid. A sphere of light formed and disappeared following Leo's command.

Hope it can make it from this dungeon to Johann in town...

"Le...o?" Aki cracked open her bloodshot eyes.

Leo glanced down and placed his hand gingerly on her uninjured cheek. "Aki, how are you? Can you see me?"

"Yeah," she muttered weakly, her eyes swollen from crying.

Thank the elements. She's okay—

Filled with relief, he instinctively reached for her and pulled her into a bear hug.

Chapter 17: The Lost Hero

“O-OW! That hurts, Leo!” Aki cried out next to his ear when he hugged her too tight and aggravated her injuries.

Whoops! Leo immediately eased his grip. His feelings had gotten the better of him, removing any thought of her wounds.

“Sorry,” he rushed out, pillowing her head with his hand as he laid her back down.

Aki’s unfocused eyes met his and she stared up at him like a child clinging to their mother after waking from a seemingly unending nightmare. She must’ve been terribly distraught for the moment she finally registered Leo, crystalline tears began streaming down her bloodied cheeks and she started sobbing.

Wanting to comfort her, Leo tenderly scooped the hair off her face and soothed, “Aki, you’re okay now. Don’t cry. We’ve gotta get you cured first. You’ve been poisoned, right?” he asked in his softest voice. She gave a small nod between sobs.

I’m glad I got to her before the poison ran its full course. Leo was filled with more relief than he thought possible.

“I got you covered. Wait just a sec. I’ll give you an antidote.”

Leo shoved his hand into his robe’s inner pocket and pulled out a transparent vial. A sticky cerulean liquid capable of curing any poison swayed within the glass.

Buying some antidotes beforehand was a good move.

He had stopped by the item shop and bought cures, antidotes, potions, and anything else that may come in handy before heading out to the Quest location. Mages relied on items to heal themselves and their allies because they didn’t have access to a Heal Spell Tree like Priests did.

Leo popped the cork out and brought the vial slowly to Aki’s mouth. He gingerly tipped the glass, steadily pouring the sappy liquid into her slightly parted lips.

Aki grimaced from the foreign liquid sticking to her tongue and gagged. Leo put his hand over her mouth to prevent her from spitting it up.

You can do it, Aki! You’ll feel a million times better if you put up with this one pain!

After all, Leo had bought a famous elixir capable of instantly curing almost any status ailment. The results should be immediate as long as she swallowed the whole thing.

His silent wish was granted when Aki’s throat moved and she gulped the medicine down with his hand still pressed against her lips. Color returned to her pallid complexion before his very eyes.

Good. Looks like this bad boy's doing its job. Unclenching his jaw, Leo removed his hand from her mouth.

Reopening her eyes after the elixir's bitterness faded, she looked right at Leo without any of the poison's haze clouding her vision.

Still supporting her head in his hand, he studied her face from above. "Aki, how do you feel? Any better now?" he asked, worry coloring his tone.

She reassured him with a weak smile. "Yes...thank you, Leo. I can't believe the pain vanished just like that... I think I'm going to be okay."

Overcome with relief to see her smile, Leo felt all the energy drain from his body with the tension.

Aki pushed herself up with her own strength, and when her eyes met Leo's sitting across from her, she threw her arms around him and hugged him with the full force of the feelings she had kept locked up.

"Whoa! What's gotten into you—"

Ignorant of the flustered state she put him in, she rattled off, "Leo, thank you so much for saving me! I couldn't do anything! I thought it was over for us..." she gasped for air. "And that's when you came to the rescue, Leo! It's like you shined the light of hope in just as I gave up..." she muttered the last part in a ghost of a voice, burying her hands in his robe as she wept.

Leo stared down at the woman clutching at his chest, his hands aimlessly hovering in the air until he decided to wrap them around her back. "...It's okay now. You're okay. I'll protect you," he whispered into her shoulder, tightening his hold on her.

He knew she had feelings for Elias. And that there was no space for him to weasel into. But he couldn't help finding her endearing and unbearably lovable for relying on him and hugging him.

Time and time again he shut off the voice in the back of his head that needled with his feelings for her. He stomped out his beating heart, yelling at it for harboring feelings for the woman his best friend loved. He pretended the feelings didn't exist, denying them—but he had reached the limit for pretending.

What would happen if I told her how I feel while Elias isn't around? Leo violently shook his head. *Didn't I decide to watch over them forever? I'll only add to her misery if I use this disaster as a chance to tell her.*

I know better... Loving her and telling her that I love her—she doesn't want any of that from me.

Leo placed his hands on Aki's shoulders and gently pushed her away along with the feelings he had for her. When she blinked up at him with watery eyes he formed the brightest smile he could muster.

"...Aki, I'm now gonna heal up that cut on your cheek and the gash in your shoulder. I can't cast awesome heals like Johann, but I

bought a buttload of potions.” He grinned, fished through his robe, and pulled out a vial filled with a mossy liquid.

Potions had the same effects as Cures used by Priests, but the potency paled in comparison to magic, making it more of a stopgap than a long-term solution. Still, being able to seal the wound and suppress the pain was better than nothing.

“Uh, and the thing is...this ointment needs to be applied directly to the injury...” Leo trailed off, his eyes hesitantly going to her bloodied right shoulder.

She needed to remove her top—in front of him—so he could apply the medicine directly to her shoulder.

...N-Not a good situation. Sh-She definitely won't be up for strippin' in front of me, and the blood will rush to my head if I touch her bare skin.

How can we get around this?

Now wasn't the time to let his feelings get the better of him, but Leo hesitated, cold sweat dripping down his back. Meanwhile, Aki yanked off her jacket and began boldly stripping in front of him. Leo nearly fell over backward.

“H-H-Hey! Wh-Wh-Wh-What're you doin'...?!”

“You can't tell by looking?” she said drolly. “I need to take off my clothes to get healed, correct? Sorry for putting on a strip show, but the clothes are coming off! I can't be of any help if I'm oozing blood everywhere.” She gnawed her bottom lip and lamented, “I won't be able to stop Elias or rescue Mina and Louis.”

She was beating herself up over not helping Elias, Mina, and Louis despite being there when everything happened.

Tossing aside her suit jacket, Aki began undoing each of her white blouse buttons from the top down.

Internally freaking out, Leo told himself it wasn't that kind of situation and silently averted his eyes from the bewitching allure of her hands. He kept his head down while the sound of buttons popping and rustling clothes filled his ears.

“...All done, Leo! Thanks for waiting!” Aki called out, getting him to finally return his gaze to her.

Blood spilled ceaselessly from the nasty gash in her exposed right shoulder and streamed down her arm.

Leo had prioritized curing her poison status, but her injuries were more severe than he had realized. He could be flustered later; treating her wounds came first and foremost.

“Sorry, Aki, I need to take a better look at that shoulder. You mind?”

“Go right ahead.”

Receiving her permission, he scooted closer to where she sat with her legs out and thoroughly examined her right shoulder. A blade had

been stabbed into her shoulder to cause that wound. Whoever attacked her had held back because the gash wasn't as deep as the blood loss made it seem.



She should recover pretty well with just a potion then.

Leo popped the lid off the vial and gingerly spread the healing ointment onto her sliced cheek and right shoulder. Aki shuddered from the numbing pain caused by the liquid, but she tenaciously endured it by digging her fingers into her skirt.

A dull light radiated from the spots the ointment touched before the open skin sealed shut, taking away the pain by several degrees and softening Aki's clenched jaw.

Once the injuries completely healed, Leo pocketed the empty vial and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"Okay, you should be all set now. How's it feel, Aki?"

She was already in the process of happily tugging her jacket back on. "I feel great. I'm all better now thanks to you, Leo!" A bright smile bloomed on her face. "I didn't get hurt much in my world so I never knew being stabbed hurt that bad! Ehehe!"

"Oh yeah, swords, magic, and monsters don't exist in your world, right?"

She came from a world where she didn't need to protect herself from constant threats to her life. *I'd love to live in a world like that*, Leo mused when she leaned in close with her still-pale-but-much-healthier-looking face.

"Leo, there's so much I want to tell you! Would you mind listening to the short version of what happened to me and Elias before you showed up?"

"Give me the simple version of everything you can remember. We're the only ones who can do anything about this stalemate. It's just us who can stop Elias and save Mina and Louis for the time being."

Until Johann receives my SOS and comes running... Putting all his hope on that gamble, Leo held out his fist and Aki bumped it with hers. *This is the first time Elias has ever left our party.*

It took Elias being gone for them to realize just how much they blindly relied on the Hero.

A piece of me has always taken advantage of Elias's strength. I'd always believed that no matter what happened, he'd never lose. That no matter what, he'd save us. Because he's the HERO.

But by doing that, I've been unknowingly pushing all the responsibility onto him, adding to his burden.

I can't believe it took having him as my enemy to realize it.

I'm a horrible friend. And here I've been stupidly hoping I could be that friend he relies on the most.

...I'm sorry, Elias. I've put everything on your shoulders and didn't even realize it. That's why, this time... Leo clenched his fists. *This time I'll be there to save you.*

Chapter 18: To be Brave

LEO sharply inhaled. "...Aki, did you just mention the Book of Creation?" he asked, not hiding his shock in the middle of her summarizing what happened.

She stared back at him wide-eyed as if she didn't understand why he was so unsettled by that particular piece of information. "I did. A Shadow Tribesman going by the name Jent Sutcliff was waving it around. From what I gather, the Dark Lord asked him to hand the book over to Elias, triggering everything that went wrong today..."

According to Aki, the Shadow Tribesman had tricked Mina into accepting this Quest in order to lure Elias into the underground lake hidden deep within the Ancient Ruins where he could give him the Book of Creation from the Dark Lord.

And when Elias tried to accept the Book of Creation from Sutcliff, the Shadow Tribesman kidnapped Aki, hurt her, and summoned a magical beast to hinder Elias's rescue attempt. Pushed to the edge, Elias awakened a great power that caused him to lose his mind when that crest of the sun formed on his forehead.

A lot of complicated things went down before getting to this point, but the Book of Creation concerned Leo the most. After all, that was the sacred scripture detailing the Hero and Dark Lord's War that Leo had been researching for years.

"Hey, Aki, did that Shadow Tribesman really have the Book of Creation on him? There should only be one copy in the entire world, and it's under strict lockdown inside Sanctuary walls. How did a member of the Shadow Tribe get a hold of it?" he pressed, leaning closer to her.

"...Only one?" Aki's eyes wavered with uncertainty. "Oh, that reminds me! Sutcliff said his was a copy of the real Book of Creation. I didn't pay the comment much attention at the time, but it makes sense now."

Leo rubbed his chin between his thumb and index finger and contemplated what she said.

A copy, huh? Could there have been a duplicate out there all along? Seems like the Shadow Tribe has had access to the Book of Creation for hundreds of years now. No wonder the Dark Lord is just as knowledgeable about the war as Johann is.

The Dark Lord had learned the truth about the world by getting his hands on the Book of Creation, putting him on the same page as the Sanctuary in the knowledge department. Considering he suggested that the Hero and Dark Lord work together against the Goddess, there had to be some obstacle either party couldn't overcome alone.

Hence why he wanted Elias to have a copy—to catch the Hero side up to speed.

It's not under the best circumstances, but I'll finally get a look at the Book of Creation I gave up on ever seeing. Leo's heart frolicked with his brimming curiosity. *Though there's no guarantee I'll get my hands on it since Aki said Sutcliff vanished somewhere after Elias snapped.*

Aki stared into space as she recalled her conversation with the Shadow Tribesman. "...Sutcliff made it sound like he was purposely trying to draw that tremendous power out of Elias. He told Elias he'd only hand over the Book of Creation if he awakened the power slumbering within."

"Good to know..."

In other words, the Dark Lord's side required Elias to awaken the monstrous power inside and tame it before they were willing to cooperate with the Hero's side.

That's even more of a reason for me to punch some sense into him until he gains control of his power.

Leo looked at Aki sitting nervously across from him, waiting for him to comment. "Thanks, Aki. I've got a pretty good idea of what happened. So here's what I suggest we do next. Rescuing Mina and Louis comes first. We'll have to go down to the lake again and fend off Elias's attacks until we can escape back here with them."

"Okay." Aki nodded, determination burning in her brown eyes.

"Once we're back here—hopefully in one piece—we'll toss every potion we have at 'em to heal their wounds. They not only took a direct hit from Elias, but were buried underneath a ton of rocks, so I fear their injuries could be severe. I seriously hope they're alive..." his voice trailed off.

Leo was positive he saw Louis cast a defense spell right before Elias's blades crashed into them. Hopefully the spell mitigated the damage, but Elias had the strength of a level 99+ Hero with epic gear, so it was hard to know if Louis's spell did any good.

They wouldn't be hurtin' if I had successfully blocked Elias's attack... Regret over his powerlessness wouldn't release its hold on him. Protecting the Hero from his enemies was his duty as a member of the Hero Party, but it was also his duty to stop the Hero from taking the wrong path.

Leo shook his head, smacked his hands against his thighs, and lifted his chin.

"I also sent Johann a distress message requestin' his help."

"You did?!" Aki's face lit up.

"We can't break our way through this hellish situation without 'im. Problem is, there's quite a distance between the underground lake and the inn. No promises the message will reach him in time. So can

you do me a big favor and return to the inn alone to fetch Johann? It'll be tough on you with the monsters roamin' this area. Are you up for it?"

"Of course! You can count on me! I'll bring Johann back with me no matter what!" Aki exclaimed, brimming with the determination to serve her role well. "What do you plan to do in the meantime? You're not coming with me, right?"

"Yeah..." Leo hesitated over how to tell her his plans at first, but he manned up and looked her straight in the eye. "I'm gonna head underground and challenge Elias to a one-on-one fight. If I can create an opening to save Louis and Mina, that'd be perfect. And it'll be a huge success if it gives me a chance to pound the sense back into my good ol' friend." He flashed an indomitable grin.

Aki looked at him as if he had just slapped her. She captured his arm with both hands and pleaded with him from under fluttering lashes. "What? Wait... What are you thinking?! Elias relentlessly attacks anything that moves! Including you, Leo! I know we have to save Mina and Louis as soon as possible. But not even you will be able to walk away from a fight with Elias when he's like this... You might die...!"

Leo cast his gaze to the ground, escaping from the desperation shimmering in her big eyes. True enough, he didn't stand a chance against Elias as he was now. Considering their prior battle, it'd take everything he had to deflect Elias's attacks long enough to help Mina and Louis.

Worst of all, Leo had already used the water from the lake to attack Elias during his last rescue efforts; he didn't have anything left up his sleeve to catch the emotionally dead Hero off guard.

Without a trump card, he didn't even have a one in a million chance against Elias.

I might...die next time, he calmly noted as if it wasn't his life on the line. It didn't matter how dangerous it was, he didn't want to risk being too late to help the others by waiting for Aki to come back with Johann or going with her.

He'd forever regret his choice if it led to their deaths. Better to gamble with his life than theirs.

Leo placed his hand on Aki's head as she caught her breath from talking all at once, and silently stood. He flashed one of his killer grins when she anxiously looked up at him.

"C'mon, don't worry so much. I don't go 'round calling myself a genius Mage for nothin'—" He stopped joking midway and gaped at Aki who stood with her head down, tears staining her cheeks. Her shoulders trembled with suppressed sobs as she clenched her fists in front of her chest. "Aki..."

“You always do that, Leo...! You always flash a silly grin to stop the rest of us from worrying while you take on all the problems by yourself! You know you might not come back from this one, but you’re still going to fight, aren’t you? I...I’m very, *very* scared that I might never see you again if I leave!” she exclaimed between sobs.

Leo clenched his fists at his side. Happiness filled him over how strongly she felt for him. He couldn’t help thinking how blessed he was to have the woman he loved crying out of concern for him.

He grabbed her fists and pulled her toward him before she could finish talking. She fell against his chest with a look of shock on her face, and he wrapped his arms around her back.

“Leo...?” she whispered.

“...You’re absolutely right. I might never see you again after you leave.”

“How could you say—”

“So there’s something I want to tell you before it’s too late.” He rested his hands on her shoulders and slowly pulled away.

Should he tell her? He had never hesitated more in his life than right now. Wouldn’t it be better to let her go on never knowing the feelings he had hidden in his heart?

But, what if, at the end of his battle with Elias, he never saw her again? Did he want these feelings to die with him? No, he wanted to tell her so he wouldn’t have any regrets if worst came to worst.

Hands still on her shoulders, he gazed passionately into her wavering eyes. And then he came out and said it.

“I love you.”

Chapter 19: Promise

HELD hostage in his powerful gaze, Aki felt the heat of his purple eyes burning into her skin, while feeling her toes curling in her shoes. She froze in place, forgetting to blink.

Leo loves...me?

Time dragged on as she tilted her head from side to side trying to get out any water from the time she fell into the gutter because she couldn't believe her ears.

Growing impatient, Leo heaved a long, theatric sigh. "...Are you seriously zoning out in the middle of my once in a lifetime confession?

"...Huh?" she uttered a little slow. "I-I'm not zoning out! You just took me by surprise is all... Do you really...?" Aki timidly peered up at him through her lashes.

Does Leo really love me? The gentle, manly, sharper than a tack, perfect Mage with unparalleled magic really has feelings for plain little old me?

Completely flabbergasted with disbelief, she blankly stood there pointing to herself.

He cleared his throat and shyly averted his eyes from her. "... Well, I'll be honest with ya, I'm having a hard time believin' I've fallen for someone as klutzy, meddlesome, and hopelessly too good for her own good like you, okay? Somethin' in my brain must've gone awry along the way..."

"...Hmm? Is that right? What a thing to say about someone you love," she huffed and pouted her lips.

Leo threw his hands up and raced to correct himself. "Gah! Sorry! I didn't mean it that way! I don't know why, but I just can't say what I mean when it matters... I'm sorry." Shoulders slumped forward with red ears, he buried his face in his hand.

Aki accidentally laughed out loud at him for acting so different from the normally confident and teasing Genius Mage. *Leo can be pretty cute sometimes.*

He glanced awkwardly at her through his fingers and exhaled for what seemed like a minute as he calmed himself. Then he lifted his head and met her gaze with seriousness gleaming in his eyes.

"You know, I...I've always thought you were super c-cute for tryin' your hardest to adapt to our world... And before I knew it, I sorta fell for you, I guess?"

Aki's heart drummed louder in her ears with each word Leo haltingly confessed to her. *Uwah! How do I react? This is so embarrassing!*

"Tha...thank...you...?"

Feeling like her face was on fire, Aki turned her head aside to hide the heat staining her cheeks.

Being told “I love you” from a sincere, amazing man like Leo brought her incredible joy. She had always cherished and cared for him, too. But her feelings for him weren’t romantic. They were more in line with the familial love one might have for an older brother.

That’s why I can’t respond in kind to his feelings... With that thought came images of her time together with Elias. *The man I love most, and who I recently learned feels the same about me. My boyfriend.*

Aki bit the inside of her cheek as she replayed the happy smile and peaceful expressions he always reserved for her. She was supposed to protect him after becoming the closest person to him, yet she couldn’t stop him from losing his mind. Worst yet, her carelessness invited the disaster that caused his powers to go berserk.

Resulting in Louis, Mina, and Leo getting hurt when they only came to help.

That’s why...that’s why I have to stop Elias. As his secretary and as his girlfriend.

Aki worked out her feeling and looked up at Leo, determined to tell him her answer. First, she had to let him know she was dating Elias.

“Listen, Leo, I—”

“You don’t have to say anything,” he sharply cut her off. Aki gasped and closed her mouth. A sad smile tugged at his lips. “You love Elias and he loves you, right? I’ve known that since day one. You don’t have to repeat it. I didn’t confess lookin’ for an answer. I just wanted to tell you how I felt while I can. That’s all.” He paused before lightly adding, “So I don’t have any regrets, you know?” This time he flashed his trademark rogue’s grin.

Leo... His smile stabbed Aki right in the heart, and tears stung her eyes. *He still cares about me even though he knows I have feelings for Elias. It’s so painful not being able to return his sincere feelings.*

“...I’m sorry, Leo. I’m so sorry...!” She hung her head, ashamed that apologizing was all she could do.

Leo gave her a hard whack on the shoulder. “C’mon, don’t start apologizin’! You’re putting me on the spot with your tears! Just gettin’ to tell you how I feel leaves me free of regrets.” He ruffled the top of her head and turned on his heel to go now that he had gotten that off his chest.

“...Thanks, Aki,” he whispered when all she did was stare long and hard at his back. “You made me unbelievably happy by answering my summoning as the Hero’s Right-hand. I’m seriously glad you came to us—that you came to me.” He took a breath. “...I’m countin’ on ya to bring back Johann. See ya.”

Leo raised his hand in a farewell wave as he took one step and then one more step closer to the underground lake where Elias waited.

Aki's eyes fastened on his broad back, and she clenched her trembling hands.

Leo is going to leave. If I let him go like this, I might never see him again. His cheerful, impish grin might be gone to me forever. Fighting Elias is the same as betting with his life. I don't... Aki bit down on her lip. I don't want that to happen!

"Leo! Wait!" Aki yelled so loud at his back she scared herself. Her high-pitched voice bounced off the stone walls, startling him into stopping and looking back at her.

"What's the problem?"

"Leo....you're...you're a coward!" she wailed.

"...Huh?" Leo's eyebrow shot into his hairline at her sudden accusation.

Planting her hands on her hips, she bent forward and ranted, "You're a coward because you confessed your feelings to me and are walking off into the sunset all cool and awesome without waiting for my response! You're so not cool!"

"...Not cool? What are you, a schoolgirl? I mean, I know your answer without hearin'—"

"So you'd better—" Aki shouted over Leo as she ran and threw her arms around his back, hugging the living daylights out of him. Surprised as he was, he caught her perfectly in his arms. Tears glittering in her eyes, she gazed up at him and buried her hands into his robe. "You'd better stay safe until I come back with Johann so I can tell you my answer! I'm gonna..." She took a deep breath and flashed a teary smile at him. "I'm gonna reject you so hard you won't know what hit you!"

Leo gawked at Aki for a long moment before bursting out laughing so hard his voice shook the cold hall. He bent over clutching his stomach laughing like he had just heard the most ridiculous, happiest thing in the world.

"Now that's a good one! I have to survive the battle of my life so I can be rejected by you! What a deal! You really are the biggest dummy in the world...!" A single tear streaked down his cheek.

"Leo...?"

"Wow. Am I cryin'? Ah, well, I'm just too dang happy hearing that from you... Scared. I'm honestly scared. If I die, I'll never get to see you, Elias, Johann, and the people I care most about again. Thinkin' about it like that scares me senseless. I definitely don't want to die." Leo hugged her back, squeezing tighter than usual to keep his fears in check.

Aki massaged circles into his back, feeling him shaking a little in

her arms. "Then please promise me that you will stay alive until I get back. Promise you won't lose no matter what he throws at you." She pulled her head away from his chest and looked up at him.

His clear purple eyes wavered and he gave a small nod. "I promise I won't lose no matter what, so share some of your good luck with me. That way I can safely reunite with you," he said, then whispered, "Elias, forgive me for this."

Leo moved Aki's bangs off her forehead and pressed his lips against the exposed skin.



Realizing what he just did to her, Aki turned cherry red and held her hands against her forehead while he pulled away from their embrace.

Turning red up to the tips of his ears, Leo flashed the smug smile of a boy who'd succeeded in pulling off the prank of a lifetime. "Thanks a bunch, Aki. You don't mind giving a little present like that to the poor fella you plan on cruelly rejectin', right?"

"H-How could you—" she stuttered when he put his hands on her shoulder and turned her in the opposite direction. "Leo?"

"Run!" He gave her back a little push. He loudly clapped his hands to stop her from turning to look at him. "Don't look back! Run! Go! Now!"

Leo...! Understanding what he wanted brought tears to her eyes for the hundredth time that day. I can't look back. I can't stand still. I have to bring Johann here no matter what it takes. That's the only way I can help Leo.

Aki raised her head in the direction she was heading and hardened her resolve. "I know you'll keep your promise...!" she said in parting, then ran full speed ahead without looking back.

Run! Run! Run! Run as fast as you can so you can bring Johann back even a second sooner!

LISTENING to Aki's footfalls fade into the distance, Leo stood perfectly still with his back to her. "'I'm gonna reject you so hard you won't know what hit you,' huh?"

She's seriously amusing. I can't believe she had me make a ridiculous promise to keep safe just so she can reject me.

Leo loved the way she expressed her real feelings without any filters. He had a thing for the way she always caught him off guard and led him around by the nose with her absurd, out-of-nowhere actions.

"...I love ya, Aki. I love ya as much as Elias does."

So I'm gonna win this duel with Elias and let him know if he keeps being a coward, I'm gonna steal you out from under his heroic nose.

Just because Aki rejects me doesn't mean I'm gonna give up on her. And if I want to live to stand a chance at winning her over, I'd better survive this fight.

"Okay, time to do this." Leo rolled his shoulders before staring down the gutter they'd escaped through.

He had to do this to keep his promise with Aki. To save his best friend Elias. And to survive another day so he could continue laughing

alongside his irreplaceable friends.

Leo ran his finger over the lips that had kissed Aki's forehead. Stealing a single kiss was enough to make him feel like she was by his side, cheering him on.

“You can do this, me....! Now's the time to show off your skill as the Genius Mage Leo!”

Chapter 20: Elias vs. Leo

WHAT awaited Leo after he parted with Aki and floated back down to the underground lake was a severely wounded man with red hair about to be thrust through the chest by Elias. Leo's eyes flew wide open at what he hadn't expected to find upon his return.

What the summon monster happened here?! What went down while Aki and I were gone? And who in the world is he?

Stop thinkin' and get movin', or he'll die!

Making a split decision, Leo spread his legs wide and thrust out his palms toward Elias. He uttered the short spell under his breath, gathering numerous magic bullets to his fingertips. Once several dozen bullets formed he swung down his arms, firing them at Elias's feet like a rapid fire ballista.

With his short incantation, the bullets wouldn't pack enough power to act as much more than a smokescreen, but it should do the trick to momentarily deflect Elias's attack.

The magic bullets spraying him in rapid succession alerted Elias to Leo's presence. Stone-faced, his eyes traveled to his friend, and he gracefully sidestepped every magic bullet as they kicked up a dust storm, carving holes in the ground where he stood a second earlier.

Leo didn't wait to confirm how far his attack pushed back Elias before racing across the field to the man lying face up in the flowers.

Dang, he's badly hurt.

The man with flaming red hair must've gone at it hard with Elias, because clean slices distinct to the Holy Sword marred his entire body, and blood gushed ceaselessly from the long gashes.

Elias did this... Knowing that deeply saddened Leo. Elias wasn't the kind of man to make sport of his opponent. He usually put an end to the battle as soon as possible. But the wounds he'd inflicted on this man appeared like he was intentionally trying to make him suffer.

Leo didn't believe for a second that Elias wanted to become a heartless killing machine. Suppose his body was acting with a separate mind of its own, indiscriminately attacking others? If the real Elias was stuck watching without a say, he had to be agonizing over not being able to stop himself.

...I have to bring him back in control fast for his sake, too! Resolve growing stronger by the second, Leo swung his gaze to where Elias had retreated from the hailstorm of magi-bullets. He kept his distance and watched Leo like a guard dog protecting a set perimeter.

He showed no signs of launching another attack against Leo to wipe him off the face of the field.

Perhaps he only attacked when someone approached him or Aki.

Trusting Elias was sticking to that unspoken rule, Leo wrenched his gaze away from him and shook the man he had scooped into his arms. "Oi, you okay? Can you hear me?"

Heat still radiated from the man's arms. He probably wasn't dead yet.

As if in answer to Leo's voice, the redhead groaned and forced open his eyes. Their vivid color caused Leo to sharply inhale. His eyes were a mysterious combination of forest green and aqua. An inhuman shade. The amount of magic pouring off him in waves was beyond human too.

I take it this is the Shadow Tribesman that Aki said set this whole farce up to hand over the Book of Creation?

The redheaded Shadow Tribesman blinked, his mind still not fully working until he saw Leo's face. Astonishment caused his blurry eyes to bulge and his swollen lips to fall open.

"Master Leo?! Why...why did you come back?!" he yelled.

"...Huh?"

Why does this guy know my name?

Leo blinked several times and took another look at the man's sharp facial features, bruised from his fight with Elias.

I don't know any Shadow Tribesmen. And I don't recall doin' anything to draw their attention.

Baffled, he wanted to question the Shadow Tribesman, but remembered they weren't in the best situation for idle chatter. Leo shook his head and directed the conversation where it mattered most.

"Hey, are you the Shadow Tribesman who attacked Elias and Aki... Jent Sutcliff, is it?"

The man nodded and lowered his eyes from Leo's face with diffidence. "I'm sorry, Master Leo... I tried to stop Heroboy, but my strength was nothing before him..."

"I see," Leo said perfunctorily.

This Shadow Tribesman took on Elias alone?

According to Aki, Sutcliff was the one who'd pushed Elias to the brink. So why was the perpetrator of this chaos trying to stop Elias from wreaking havoc?

I haven't a jot about his intentions. But I can't waste time questionin' the guy.

Leo gave his head another shake and assessed the man barely keeping his swollen eyes open. "...Goddess damn it. I've got a mountain of questions for you, but savin' my friends comes before dealing with you. I can't have you dyin' on me though."

Keeping one eye trained on Elias, Leo shoved his right hand into his robe and pulled out a potion vial. A potion bought at a normal item shop wasn't potent enough to fully heal his wounds, but it should

help him recover to the point of walking on his own two legs.

Leo pulled out the stopper and pressed the vial into Sutcliff's hand. "Can you do me a favor and rescue my friends, Mina and Louis, from under that pile of rocks over there once you heal up with this?"

Teleportation magic should be a cinch for a Shadow Tribesman. It wouldn't take much effort on his part to teleport to safety with Mina and Louis.

To Leo, securing their safety mattered most. He knew Elias would be permanently crippled with despair if his attacks led to the death of his friends.

Sutcliff accepted the potion, forced himself upright, and started sprinkling the sappy liquid onto his gaping wounds.

Protecting Sutcliff behind him, Leo stood facing Elias as he drew his dagger.

Successfully rescuing Mina and Louis hinged on whether he could buy enough time against Elias for Sutcliff to recover. Sure, he caught him off guard during his last rescue attempt, but he couldn't think of another surprise attack, so he was stuck challenging him head-on.

What strategy should I go with this time, hm? Out of the corner of Leo's eye he saw Sutcliff hop to his feet, his injuries already healed. *Humans have nothing on the Shadow Tribe when it comes to agility and physical strength. Making him my ally in this might've just increased my odds.*

"Sutcliff, can you answer me one thing?" Leo asked, his gaze still trained on the expressionless Elias. "You're the one who put Elias in this state, right? I'm not gonna wring your neck about that right now, but shouldn't you know how to snap him out of it?"

He sensed Sutcliff meekly shaking his head behind him. "Yeah, 'bout that...I'd planned for him to awaken his powers, but I didn't know he'd lose his mind in the process. I'm totally unprepared for this..."

"...Put another way, you don't have a clue about how to undo what you've done to him," Leo groaned, trying his best not to grow depressed after having his one ray of hope squashed.

Looks like Johann is our only hope. Got no choice but to buckle down and live until Johann and Aki come running to our aid.

Challenging Elias to a duel was a suicide mission, but having the Shadow Tribesman around to help was more encouraging than going at it alone.

Anyways... Leo slowly released the air in his lungs. *Pessimism won't beat me before I even try. I've got a promise to keep, after all. I can't go croakin' until she's back.*

Leo began quietly chanting a Lunar Magic spell, causing Elias to instantly switch into combat mode with the Holy Sword positioned in

front of him. Responding to his command, water swirled around his drawn dagger and hardened into a crystal shell of ice.

He was employing an ancient strategy of imbuing a weapon with Lunar Magic, turning it into a so-called Magic Dagger. Only a select few Mages who had mastered physical skill trees were capable of wielding this dangerous class of magic.

A magic user like Leo didn't stand a chance dueling a physical damage dealer like Elias without hitting him with everything he had up his sleeve.

"...I can't believe the day has come where I have to fight you for real, Elias." Leo crouched with a white chill swirling around the magic dagger in his hand.

Running through his mind were the days he used to smack Elias awake in the middle of the night to train during their travels. When he first joined Elias's party, he had insisted on learning swordsmanship so he could take on any hard bosses the Hero Party might face in the future. Happily going along with his selfish request, Elias joined him night after night in grueling duels.

...I'd always wanted to duel you once. Not as a part of our training or for fun, but a real duel without holding anything back. I wanted you to acknowledge my swordsmanship. To praise me with that heartfelt smile of yours as you said, "You're strong."

Who would've guessed the day I fought you for real would be this miserable.

Leo curled his fingers around the dagger's handle. "Elias, I'm gonna view you as an enemy and hit you with everything I've got in order to bring you back to us, and to stop you from making her—from making Aki sad. This is gonna be the fight of our lives. No holding back." He took a deep breath.

Do it, Leo. So that you won't leave behind any regrets whether you win or lose!

"Here I come, buddy!"

Sutcliff dashed off in the opposite direction to rescue Mina and Louis from the pile of rocks simultaneously as Leo launched himself toward Elias. The pounding of their feet hitting the dirt overlapped.

The others should be okay in Sutcliff's hands. Knowing that significantly lifted the weight off Leo's chest.

Sensing Leo's intent to fight, Elias's face hardened and he soundlessly kicked off the ground, zooming across the field at such speeds he closed the distance between them faster than most end bosses could.

Such speed! You're seriously not made like the rest of us, buddy.

The Hero: a legendary and heroic entity born to save the world.

People stayed away from Elias, leaving him to live a solitary

existence because of the overwhelming power he was endowed with as the Hero. Gentle spirit that he was, Elias never voiced his loneliness, instead choosing to accept the path laid out for him all the while silently struggling with isolation.

He never once strayed from his path until she appeared like a comet lighting up the night: Aki.

She shined a light on his loneliness by insisting with all her being that he, the man who pretended being a Hero was all that mattered, was just another human being before he was this legendary warrior.

That's why...that's why it shouldn't be surprising he fell for her so hard he lost his mind seeking the power to protect her. It should've been expected.

...I don't care what reasons Sutcliff had, I'll never forgive him for abusin' Elias and Aki's relationship. I'd better snap Elias outta it so the two of us can wait on Sutcliff later.

Leo brandished the dagger in front of him as he sprinted toward Elias and jumped into the air. "Try a taste of this first, Elias!" he boldly taunted, slamming his raised dagger against the ground when he landed.

As soon as the blade struck the ground, icicles erupted in a straight line toward Elias.

The nifty thing about magic swords was that they allowed the user to quickly perform magic attacks without a spell. It made Leo capable of fast, continuous long-range attacks, which should've leveled the playing field against Elias's newly acquired skills.

Elias paused in front of the imminent icicles, slightly narrowed his eyes, exhaled once, then swept the Holy Sword to the side. Platinum air blades soundlessly fired from his sword, destroying the icicles in a row as if they were dominoes. Shattered pieces of ice hailed onto the ground like miniature daggers.

Leo adjusted his grip on the dagger as he mildly watched his icicles crumble.

...Go figure. You won't even bat an eyelash at a spell like this. But I'm not backing down either. I can't lose here. We can't lose you here forever. Everyone is waitin' for you to rejoin us!

Leo braced himself and spun the dagger in all four directions with dancelike precision. Ice blades sliced through the air and ran across the field toward Elias each time he brought down his dagger.

Elias didn't slow down, but cut through each ice blade as he ran closer. It was only a matter of time before he closed the gap between them.

Have you done your job yet, Sutcliff?! I've gotta keep this guy busy until Mina and Louis are outta harm's way!

Just as Leo was holding back Elias's monstrous pursuit with his

barrage of ice blades, he heard the call he'd be eagerly waiting for.

"Master Leo! Your friends are alive! They've been knocked unconscious, but they aren't seriously injured!"

Some good news for once!

Louis had likely mitigated the damage with his last-minute spell. His boasting wasn't for nothing because he'd managed to activate a spell in the short few seconds before Elias's blades had hit.

Relief caused Leo to look over his shoulder. "Sutcliff! Can you escape somewhere safe with th—"

"Master Leo, in front of you!"

Leo swung his gaze back to his opponent at the sound of Sutcliff's hair-raising cry.

Careless mistake.

In the second his joy caused him to look back, he had removed his gaze from Elias.

Next he saw him, Elias was right before his eyes.

Y-You gotta be kiddin'! Did he close a mile in a second?!

He hadn't made a sound nor left a tangible aura. Leo had only looked away for a fraction of a second, too.

Leo threw up his dagger and braced his legs to meet Elias's attack. The Hero's vacant golden eyes had come within a foot of Leo's face.

"Elias...!" he cried his best friend's name with the threadbare hope he'd react despite knowing his voice couldn't reach him. Elias showed no visible reaction.

Biting his lip, Leo prepared himself for the weight of Elias's raised sword—except, it never came. Elias vanished from view.

Huh? What happened? Where did Elias go?

"Master Leo! Behind you!" Sutcliff warned in a shrill cry.

In the same moment, Leo sighted Elias's white coat whooshing by out of the corner of his eye.

He got behind me?!

Cold sweat slid down Leo's cheek as he stood rooted to the spot as if invisible hands held him there. He fearfully jerked his neck back to where Elias had soundlessly appeared.

Fast! He's too damn fast! I didn't even see him move!

An overwhelming difference in power.

It doesn't matter how much I use magic to my advantage, I can't win with this power disparity between—

"Master Leo----!"

Sutcliff's harrowing scream in the distance, Leo felt Elias's Holy Sword mercilessly shred through the muscles in his back.

Searing heat took the place of intense pain and black dots blurred his vision.

Bright red, which he assumed was his blood, sprayed onto the ground in puddles, painting the blue flowers a gruesome color.

...Oi, oi. I'm pretty screwed, aren't I? Not even a second after his dazed mind managed that thought, he was sent flying by the slash to his back. He sailed several feet before hitting the ground rolling.

With no means to stop himself, he tumbled until he lost momentum and landed with his face shoved in the dirt. He broke into a violent coughing fit. He dyed the ground red with bloody vomit as he felt an immense amount of blood gushing from the throbbing sword wound in his back.

...He dealt me a fatal blow all right.

He heard each crunch of the dirt as Elias slowly stalked closer. It was literally the sound of death approaching.

Is this the end of the road for me...? The will to fight rapidly oozed out of him. *I bet you can't forgive me for takin' away your precious Aki.*

"Pft," Leo managed a gargled snort.

He thought he'd lived life to its fullest up to that point, but apparently he wanted to live longer. Death came out of the blue. Frankly, he'd rather go out with a bang than die face down in the dirt.

What a lame way to die—

"I know you'll keep your promise...!"

The memory of Aki shouting that as she ran off for his sake infiltrated his depressing thoughts.

Just how heartbroken would she be if she came back to find Elias standing over his dead body?

And that's why I can't just let myself get killed in a ditch like this!

He couldn't move anything.

The footsteps he'd heard at regular intervals came to a complete stop. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the tip of Elias's familiar white boots. Laboriously lifting his gaze from the dirt, his eyes met Elias's staring heartlessly down at him.

Gone was the best friend who always had a gentle smile in store for everyone. In its place was an unforgiving mask of ice sharper than any blade.

...You really aren't yourself, are ya, buddy? Did you seriously forget me?

"Did our time together mean nothin' to you...?! Damn it!" he sputtered in a weakened voice.

Elias slowly raised the Holy Sword to deliver the killing blow. Leo no longer had the energy to counter his strike or the power to deflect it with a miraculous show of magic.

...Well, I guess it's not the worst way to go, having my last breath taken by my best friend. Way better than bein' done in by some random monster somewhere. But I do have one lingerin' regret...

Aki.

Leo weakly stretched out his hand toward where he imagined he saw her smiling.

Sorry I couldn't keep my promise.

Sorry for being uncool until the end. Sorry for being pathetic.

"...I wanted you to reject me so hard I wouldn't know what hit me..."

I wanted to laugh through my tears and say, "You've got guts for rejectin' me! You'll definitely regret it!"

I won't even get the chance to be rejected...?

Through his contorting vision, Elias's raised Holy Sword gleamed blindingly.

"...Aki, Elias, I'm sorry. Sorry for failing to save you..."

I pray that someday...you two...at least...can be happy...

About to close his eyes on his regrets, Leo barely made out a black coat whisking in front of him.

"Sutcliff...?" He thought his eyes were playing tricks on him.

Sutcliff had appeared out of thin air with his arms spread protectively in front of Leo. Shadow Tribesmen excelled at teleportation spells—he had used one to come to Leo's rescue in the blink of an eye.

The unexpected turn of events anchored Leo's fading consciousness to the present. "Wh-What...you...doin'...Sutcliff!" he raised his voice, hoarse and parched from vomiting blood.

"We can't lose you here...!" Sutcliff responded without looking at him. "You are our only hope!"

"Don't...say stuff I can't understand...!" Leo fought with every aching fiber in his body to push himself up onto his hands and knees. He forced his dimming vision to focus on Sutcliff's back.

I'm beggin' ya, please dodge, Sutcliff! You'll die for real if you're on the receivin' end of Elias's slash!

Sutcliff maintained his forward facing stance as he held his left hand over Leo behind him. Under his breath he chanted a familiar teleportation spell. He was trying to teleport Leo away from Elias.

The Holy Sword gleamed viciously above Elias's head. His inscrutable eyes were locked on Sutcliff eagerly chanting the teleportation spell with Leo hidden behind him.

Stop...

The merciless swing of the Holy Sword. The incantation wouldn't make it in time. And still, Sutcliff wove those words as fast he could to save Leo.

Stop it...!

"STOP IT!" Leo roared from the pit of his stomach, reaching for Sutcliff's leg.

A gust of silver light blew through the field as if stopping time itself. The luminescent flowers rustled as the wind warmly wrapped around Leo and Sutcliff. The pain instantly abated as if they'd never been injured.

Could it be—

"Good grief. Could the situation get any more pathetic than this?! I expect more from you two!"

That angry scolding brought Leo the greatest relief possible. Before Leo could call out the name of their most welcomed visitor, a powerful silver barrier formed in front of Sutcliff, repelling Elias's downward strike and knocking his arm back with the force of it.

The aftershock still managed to knock Sutcliff on his butt while the silver wind finished fully healing the countless injuries marring his and Leo's body.

Only one person in the entire world was capable of perfectly wielding such fussy recovery spells.

Regaining the feeling in his numbed back, Leo sprung to his feet and swung his gaze toward their savior.

There he found Johann wiping the sweat off his brow with one hand, his staff thrust in front of him with the other, and Aki at his side. Behind them Mina and Louis were getting to their feet.

Tears inconsiderately sprung to Leo's eyes the second he saw his friend's gallant arrival. Beyond his misty vision Johann's lips curved into a triumphant smile.

"Be grateful I made it just in the nick of time. Can't you figure out how to heal yourself without me? Honestly, you're nothing but trouble."

"Now you've said it, Johann! You're damn late!"

Johann's relieved smile and gentle expression eased his usual barbed remarks. Leo countered him with a teary grin.

With Johann here we can pull this off... thank the elements. Leo's knees nearly buckled with the peace he felt. Just as his face softened into a dopey grin, he saw Aki lean forward with her hand on Johann's shoulder, tears brimming in her eyes.

"Leo! Are you all right?!"

Leo nodded so hard he felt his head might fall off in response to the woman he was positive he'd never see again. "Yeah! Yeah! Somehow, I am. Thanks for keepin' our promise, Aki. I kept up my end, too."

I stayed alive 'til you came back.

"Thank you!"

Leo held out his right hand to stop Aki from running across the field to him.

Elias swept down his deflected sword arm, then lowered it to his

side as his eyes fastened on the newcomers. His glazed gaze burned with the first sign of life when it anchored on Aki and Aki alone.

Is that it? Leo looked from Elias to Aki.

Elias was showing his first emotional reaction with Aki there. Desire to protect her cracked through his lack of expression. Couldn't they use that to their advantage to appeal to the real him?

Aki's presence might be the key to bringing Elias back to us.

As Leo was contemplating their next move, shock over the crest glowing on Elias's forehead widened Johann's eyes. He shot a pointed glare at Sutcliff who was standing in front of Leo with his two daggers at the ready to take on Elias.

"...I see. So that was what you were after. You triggered the Solar Goddess's crest, didn't you, Sutcliff?"

The Solar Goddess's Crest: that was the name of the Hero's true power slumbering within Elias.

Chapter 21: Direct Descendant of the Bellwethers

SUTCLIFF shrugged indifferently in response to Johann's cutting glare. "Bingooo. Long time no seeee, Clarence." He flashed his fangs in a half-grin.

Johann held a hand to his head, just dealing with the Shadow Tribesman drained him.

Aki tilted her head. *Strange. Are Johann and Sutcliff acquainted? I didn't know Johann had friends among the Shadow Tribe.*

Johann shook his head at her questioning stare. "...I will explain everything to you later. We have to focus our full efforts on rescuing Elias from himself right now."

He turned from Aki and raised his voice for everyone to hear. He rushed through a quick rundown of what he knew while keeping an eye on the unmoving Elias. "The takeaway is this: the only one capable of stopping Elias is Aki. The Solar and Lunar Goddesses have polar opposite powers. This gives her the ability to suppress the Solar energy controlling him. Basically, we need Aki to hit Elias with the full brunt of her Lunar powers to negate his."

In the end, Aki held the key to whether they won or lost the battle against Elias. Everyone swallowed hard at that realization.

I'm scared... That was her first thought. Knowing this was something only she could do didn't help. She wanted to stop Elias. To help him. *But can I pull it off?*

Aki dropped her gaze to the flowers crushed under her shoes. Johann placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"Aki, there is nothing for you to fear. You have my full support in this."

"How will you support me...?"

"Please see for yourself." Johann held the staff out with both hands and rapped it against the ground. He narrowed his reverent blue eyes on the tip. "O Goddess of Creation, release the golden scabbard."

The moment Johann loudly chanted, a silver wind, manifesting the power of the Creation Goddess, swirled around the field and wrapped about the tip of his staff like a silk garment.

Lucid silver light outlined the shape of his staff until the cross transformed into a sharp blade. By the time the light abated, the cross-shaped staff had become a full-length spear.

Aki gaped, shifting her gaze from the gleaming spear to the side of Johann's face. He suddenly grimaced with pain and staggered a step forward.

"Johann?!"

“Johann, are you okay?!” Louis rushed forward and caught Johann a second faster than Aki.

Clutching onto Louis’s arm for support, Johann raised his sweat-drenched face. “...Forgive me. This is my second time using this weapon today. The strain is a bit much on my body. Thank you for your assistance,” he said, taking a step forward without Louis’s aid.

Louis gawked at the spear. “Am I correct in assuming...that is one of the Holy Relics bestowed upon the Ancients by the Creation Goddess? The Holy Spear, yes? I’ve heard that it drains the user’s stamina like a sieve in return for granting immense power. This is the first I’ve seen one in person... So the Holy Relics were real.”

Surprised he knew anything about it, Johann swung his gaze to Louis. “You’re well-informed. As you speculated, this is the Holy Spear bestowed upon Ivan Clarence by the Creation Goddesses. The spear is endowed with power from both the Lunar and Solar Goddess, so it should be capable of supporting Aki in suppressing the Solar powers running amok within Elias,” he explained, looking to each of their party members before smiling encouragingly at Aki. “Hence why you have nothing to fear, Aki. I am here for you.”

His stark white complexion caused by the burden placed on him from maintaining the Holy Spear bellied the confidence he tried to instill in her.

Johann is trying to assist me at a great cost to his health. Aki burned Johann’s weak smile into her mind. So what good am I if quiver in fear of the unknown effects of my own powers? Nothing will change at all if I complain about being incapable of doing it and use that as an excuse to run away from the one thing I can do.

Get a grip, Aki! Everyone is relying on me! Aki raised her head and took in Johann’s grim side profile as he watched Elias motionlessly eyeing them, Leo worriedly waiting for them to make their next move, and Sutcliff, Mina, and Louis silently giving them space.

Finally, her eyes landed on Elias who looked so sad despite being expressionless.

I’m the only one who can save him. Our friends are going to help make that possible. It’s time for me to fulfill my role as the Hero’s Right-hand—as the Hero’s Secretary.

Aki closed her eyes and exhaled. She opened them again with newfound resolve. “Guys, I’m going to do everything in my power to save Elias! Please assist me in any way you can!” She deeply bowed to her fellow party members.

Elias had once bowed to them asking for their help. He must’ve felt then what she did now. Success rode on her shoulders, but it was a success she couldn’t achieve alone. Their party was necessary to pull it off.

Please lend me your strength so I can do this! I know he's waiting for us to save him! Aki struggled to look up and face the others. Johann placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Of course everyone will help you. Let's save Elias together. Please stop with the sad notion of trying to do everything on your own." He crouched beside her and flashed a champion's smile.

Heart warmed by the rare teasing grin he put on display just for her, Aki straightened and took hold of his hands. "Thank you, Johann! You're always so sweet."

Honestly, I want to say the same thing to you someday, Johann. When you need me most, I'll return the favor, Aki promised in her heart. She had seen how much he was suffering being stuck as the go-between for the Hero Party and the Sanctuary. *I hope the day will come that he will stop fighting alone and ask us for help.*

Wanting to share that unspoken promise with him, Aki squeezed his hands. Wiser than his years, Johann picked up on what she was trying to convey, and his expression shifted to a sad smile with a hint of happiness wavering in the blue depths of his eyes.

Moment over, Johann raised his head and looked out across their ragtag party. "All right, allow me to explain our battle strategy. Please listen closely because I won't repeat myself."

He gave them a succinct rundown of the battle plan that even Aki could follow. Basically, the other four had to hold Elias back until Aki and Johann finished chanting an ancient spell capable of suppressing the Solar Crest on Elias's forehead.

I wish there was a way to bring him back without fighting. But I'm not so naïve to think that's possible now.

Elias stood with the Holy Sword drawn, waiting for them to make the first move. Almost as if he was waiting for them to figure out a way to save him.

Johann struck his Holy Spear against the ground, signaling an end to their strategy meeting. "There you have it. Please split into the vanguard and rearguard teams and take up your positions. Each one of you has a very important role to play in this. We can't pull it off if any of you are knocked out. Do everything you can to follow the strategy—"

"Wait up a sec!" Sutcliff interrupted just as everyone started moving toward their predetermined positions.

Johann shot Sutcliff an irate glare. "Sutcliff!" he fumed. "What is so important you—"

"I've got somethin' to give Master Leo before the battle!" Sutcliff said over him. "Now's as good a time as ever for him to use it!" He snapped his fingers, and a beautiful dagger with a magnificent sheath embroidered with silver thread magically appeared in his hand.

Vines delicately carved into the silver handle, sheath, and large blade resembled the patterns on Johann's Holy Spear. Even to the amateur's eye, the dagger's profound metalwork screamed it was an epic weapon not sold in any weapon shop. It also gave off a similar aura as Elias's Holy Sword.

Johann's eyes practically bulged out of their sockets. "Can that possibly be... Lenard's dagger?"

"Lenard's dagger?" Aki repeated as she admired the beautiful weapon.

"It's one of the Holy Relics bestowed upon humanity by the Goddesses. The story goes that Ivan Clarence was best friends with a boy named Lenard, and the two of them were the bellwethers governing the world during the Creation Era. The records say the Goddesses held their leadership in such esteem that they gave Ivan the Holy Spear and Lenard the Holy Dagger," Johann explained in one breath as he pulled on his memory. His eyes lingered on the silver dagger.

"However, the Holy Dagger has been missing for centuries. Sanctuary hasn't left a table unturned searching for it. Now I understand why they never found it. The Shadow Tribe had it stashed away," he sighed.

Sutcliff raised an offended eyebrow. "Oi, oi, Clarence, you hurt my feelings. We didn't stash it away, we were keeping it safe from your sticky Sanctuary paws. Sure, only a few select bloodlines can use the Holy Relics, but they still harbor untold powers we can't have the Sanctuary abusin'."

"...Well, I won't defend the Sanctuary. We can save such debates for another time. For now, I understand why you have the Holy Dagger. What I don't understand is why you wish to give it to Leo...?"

Johann could control the Holy Spear because he was a direct descendant of Ivan. Going by that logic, could Leo be related to Lenard?

Leo looked just as confused as the rest of them.

Sutcliff narrowed his eyes on Johann. "Do you know Lenard's real name, Clarence?"

"His real name...? I have only heard that Ivan had the last name Clarence because he hailed from upper society, while Lenard had no last name because he was born among the poor..." Johann answered, sounding uncertain.

Sutcliff walked over to Leo, went down on one knee, and reverently held the Holy Dagger up to him with both hands. "Lenard wasn't born with a last name like Clarence said, but Ivan later gave him one to secure his social status. He didn't say his name much in front of others, so it never became public knowledge. What do you

think that last name was?" He paused, but no one answered. "It was none other than Gaines."

Aki swung her gaze over to Leo. Leo whose full name was Leo Gaines.

Sutcliff flashed his pearly white fangs. "You're a smart lot, so I'm sure you've pieced together that his full name was Lenard Gaines. Same last name as Master Leo. He's the direct descendant of Lenard Gaines, the very man who ruled the world alongside Ivan Clarence during the Creation Era."

"...Leo is...Lenard's descendant?" Johann gaped at Leo as if he couldn't believe his ears.

Leo stared back at Johann and Sutcliff in just as much disbelief. "Okay, what exactly does that mean for me? What am I supposed to do with that?"

Sutcliff raised his head and held the dagger higher, urging Leo to take it. "Master Leo, please let me explain in detail later. We don't have much time. Will you please accept the Holy Dagger? You'll need it to help us out of this crisis. Only you, a direct descendant of Lenard Gaines, can wield this Holy Relic."

"How am I supposed to believe that out of the blue like this?"

"The Shadow Tribe has protected this sacred weapon from the Sanctuary's dogs for generations. So that we could one day entrust it to Lenard Gaines' rightful heir. Now is the time to unleash its holy powers. Please wield this and save your friend alongside Clarence and Aki."

Overwhelmed, Leo stared hard at the dagger presented to him, swallowing audibly instead of an answer.

Out of the loop, Aki watched on in silence with Mina and Louis. Leo suddenly looked at her as his fingers hesitantly hovered over the dagger. "Leo...?"

"Frankly, I don't get all the fuss, but I'll be able to help out Aki and Johann with this dagger, yeah? And I can save my friend—save Elias with it, right?" Leo double-checked before touching the dagger. Sutcliff firmly nodded, dagger still resting in his hands.

Aki didn't see the whole picture, but she did know that their chances would skyrocket with Leo getting a power boost from the Holy Dagger.

Gazing up at the gleaming point of the Holy Spear, Johann somberly spoke. "...I see. No one could have guessed that Leo is Lenard's descendant. Truthfully, we all believed that the bloodline had died off, but I am glad to see it has passed down the generations like the Clarences. I assume the only reason Sanctuary was led to believe the Gaines line had died off is because the Shadow Tribe ensconced the family along with the Holy Dagger."

“You’ve got it.” Sutcliff raised his right shoulder in a half shrug.

Uninterested in discussing it further with the Shadow Tribesman, Johann shifted his gaze from Sutcliff to Leo. “It seems we were fated to meet each other eventually, Leo.”

“How’s that?” Leo cocked an eyebrow.

Embarrassed, Johann coughed into his hand. “...Lenard and Ivan were revolutionaries who brought together a disorganized world and guided them into the future. Their history may only be known to the Sanctuary and the Shadow Tribe, but doesn’t it seem fitting for us—their descendants—to gather as members of the Hero Party that shoulders the fate of the world once more?” Johann rattled off, sounding awfully shy despite the serious nature of his words.

Catching on to his friend’s hidden meaning, Leo scratched the back of his head and summarized, “Oh, I get it. You’re basically sayin’ we can become best buds like Ivan and Lenard?”

“...Th-That is not it at all. What I am saying is that we can work together to draw out the true strength of the Holy Relics like they had during their years of friendship. Enough of this. Just accept the Holy Dagger already, would you? Elias isn’t going to stand around waiting for us to make a move all day, you know?”

Hahaha! Johann’s secretly happy.

Johann tried to talk around it, but Leo had hit the nail on the head. Aki could tell he was happy to have found a deep commonality with Leo after learning their ancestors had been best friends.

Leo chuckled when Johann bashfully turned his face away. Then he laid his hand on the dagger Sutcliff had been patiently holding up. Silver light outlined the dagger for a whole second after his long fingers curled around the handle.

“Heavy dagger... So this is the power Lenard carried with him, huh?” Leo muttered, swinging the weapon once to get a feel for it before running over to Johann and Aki. He stopped just opposite of Johann with Aki between them.

They took up position on her right and left side, there to support her when she activated the ancient magic that was paramount to their strategy.

It’s very reassuring to have Leo and Johann with me. We’ll definitely save Elias. Aki’s heart kicked up an excited beat at the first real hope she felt that day.

She looked up at Leo on her left and he smiled reassuringly at her. “Woo! Now I can really help you out! You can do this, Aki. Let’s work together to bring him back.”

Mysteriously knowing that they were ready to fight, Elias raised the Holy sword and positioned his legs in a battle-ready stance.

Sutcliff, Mina, and Louis took up position as decoys for Elias. Not

only did Aki have extremely reliable allies standing in front of her, but Johann on her right, and Leo on her left.

I'm not alone. Everyone is on my side. They're fighting with me.

Elias, we have so many friends who are willing to help us. Aki returned Elias's nebulous gaze and shut her eyes in prayer. *So please, please, return to us!*

Chapter 22: My Place

“HEY, Johann?” Leo’s voice cut through Johann’s endless mulling. The Mage was looking at him with his hand on top of Aki’s head. “How do I use this Holy Dagger? What do I have to do to help her out?”

Aki glanced up at Leo and quickly looked away.

What’s this? Have Leo and Aki gotten closer? What happened between them while I was away? Johann shook his head. As curious as he was, delving into their relationship wasn’t going to help anyone right now. He was the only one with the knowledge capable of saving Elias. It wasn’t an exaggeration to say the success of this plan hinged on his sound judgment and apt instructions.

Failure is not an option. He curled his fingers around the Holy Spear until his knuckles turned white.

Strangely enough, it was in this moment where he was putting his life on the line that he felt he had become a true member of the Hero Party. Even if it was only in his head.

There has never been a moment that I didn’t long to be a real part of their team.

Gnawing at his bottom lip, Johann dipped his head and softly addressed Aki and Leo. “I want you both to know that...I have always longed for the day where you would need me. Loneliness has come hand in hand with my orders to monitor your every move. Not a day has gone by where I haven’t secretly wished to fight alongside you as a genuine member of your party—not just a Sanctuary spy. I can’t stop hoping for forgiveness—for permission to be with you all....”

It was the worst possible time for this kind of confession, but the truth he kept bottled up spilled from his lips without a filter. Pointless obstinacy and lack of courage normally stopped him from speaking his mind, but he wanted to share the truth in this moment where he was assisting his party as a friend and not as the Sanctuary’s watchdog.

Mina, Louis, and Sutcliff patiently waited for him to finish spilling his guts. Even Elias silently watched on as if he were listening.

Johann leaned forward and raised his voice so that his words would reach the fallen Hero. “So please...please trust me! I will use every ounce of power available to me to save Elias!” he declared so loud he became short of breath and his cheeks flushed.

Silence answered his declaration. Then Leo suddenly reached out with his big hand and ruffled his hair. “Oof! Hey! Leo! What are you —”

“C’mon, ain’t it obvious we already trust you? We’ve been fightin’ back to back for years now! How could you be anythin’ but a

fellow party member?”

“How...?” Astonished, Johann returned Leo’s gaze from under his messed up head of hair. There he found Leo’s carefree grin and Aki leaning toward him with her fists clenched in front of her chest.

“Leo is absolutely right! When have you not put your all on the line for us, Johann? Take today for example. We were only able to save everyone because you came running the instant you saw Leo’s SOS. We have long since viewed you as an irreplaceable party member. It’s you who distanced yourself from us, Johann!” she fumed and thrust her finger at his chest.

D-Did I make her angry? Wasn’t this where she would normally hug him and soothe him with, “It’s okay, Johann. We forgive you.” How did he get stuck with having to apologize instead?!

Leo cracked up laughing behind Aki as her shoulders moved up and down with her angry rant. “This girl always gives you what’s on her mind whether you want to hear it or not! I got yelled at earlier, too.”

“I-I didn’t yell at you...!”

“You didn’t, huh? Then what about when you announced you’re going to reje—”

“Waaaaaaaah! Stop! Don’t say that in front of the others!”

Johann broke into a smile as they bickered in front of him. Aki had him pinned pretty well. The Hero Party had long since accepted him—it was Johann who had created the wall between them.

I didn’t open up because I couldn’t forgive myself... The rest of the group had been patiently waiting for the day where he lowered his walls and let them in. *They saw right through me. I’m so happy I could cry. I’ll save Elias and show them what it means to have me on the team.*

“All right, enough sentimentality,” Johann addressed the group in a serious voice, breaking their momentary reprieve and bringing them back to the matter at hand. “We should start by having Leo release the Holy Dagger’s locks before Aki accesses the Lunar Goddess’s power. Leo, can you repeat the ancient incantation after me?”

Though the ancient spell to unleash a Holy Relic was one of the most difficult in the world, Leo was a master of his class capable of pulling it off without practice.

Meeting his every expectation, Leo didn’t flinch from Johann’s request. He imitated the way Johann held the Holy Spear.

Johann’s lips curved into a grin as he took a breath to calm his nerves and began chanting those ancient words in a sonorous voice. “O Goddess of Creation.”

“O Goddess of Creation!” Leo’s clear voice traveled the length of the field after Johann.

Sandwiched between the two magic users concentrating every nerve ending on their Holy Relics, Aki held her breath and pressed her hands together in prayer. She had the hardest job ahead, and still her thoughts were with them. Johann truly believed she was the kindest person among them.

I have to make this plan a success for her sake, too! So that her heart no longer bleeds over seeing Elias like this.

Johann looked past Aki at Leo who squarely met his gaze and winked. His whimsical grin almost made it seem as though he was enjoying the intensity of the moment.

Of course Leo would be at ease during his first time unleashing a Holy Relic.

Johann often teased Leo for calling himself a Genius Mage, but it turned out that his friend had inherited a bloodline that literally put him on the map as one of the most powerful Mages in the world. Perhaps necessity had chosen him as the Hero's Mage.

Johann and Leo nodded at the same time, deeply inhaled, and trained their gazes on the weapons they held in front of them. Together they resonantly chanted the last half of the spell. "Release the golden scabbard!"

Fissures instantly ran through Leo's Holy Dagger, releasing blinding silver light. The scabbard burst into a million little pieces like glass, revealing a gorgeous, shimmering silver blade.

Johann was captivated by the godly blade that had belonged to Lenard. Not even the Sanctuary's records had a description of the most sublime dagger in existence.

Face illuminated by the silver glow, Leo stared in disbelief at the naked blade. As Johann gave him a sidelong glance, he wondered: did Lenard Gaines look like Leo did? Did he and Leo look like their ancestors did before they fought for the world's sake?

Leo suddenly grimaced and stumbled forward while Johann was thinking of the heroes of the past.

"Leo! Are you all right?!" Aki shot out a hand and caught him.

"Sorry 'bout that," he muttered as he took his weight off of her. Sweat beading his brow, his eyes swept over to Johann. "...Well, damn. What the hell am I holdin'? The energy is pourin' outta me just keepin' it in my hand..." he squeezed out, wiping off his sweat.

Indeed, the Holy Relics drained the wielder's energy just by holding it once activated. Almost as if the Goddesses were slurping up their magic as payment for using their weapons. Leo would be particularly burdened since this was his first time entering into a relationship with the Holy Dagger. But he was the only person in the world capable of using it now. It'd drain him dry, but they needed him to master it regardless of the load it put on him.

"I know it's tiresome, but please suck it up, Leo! Someone at your level should be able to master a Holy Relic without breaking a sweat. I mean, you are a self-proclaimed Genius Mage, yes?" he teased, earning a deliberate snarl from Leo before he happily beamed.

"I keep tellin' ya it's not self-proclaimed!"

"I know. There is no other Mage I would want to have my back." Johann grinned at Leo, then rested a hand on Aki's shoulder. "Are you ready, Aki? We are sending our power to you next. Both of you chant the ancient words after me please."

"Yes, sir!"

"You've got it, pal."

Aki and Leo responded nervously.

The real battle begins here. I will make sure we succeed!

Magically sensing Johann, Aki, and Leo preparing to chant the ancient spell, Elias took his first step forward since Aki showed up. Mina, Louis, and Sutcliff switched into battle stances, standing between Elias and the other three.

At the snap of Sutcliff's fingers, five giant black wolves appeared from the mud and prowled in a circle around Elias.

Strange as it is, having a Shadow Tribesman on our side is heartening.

Stamina and magic surpassing humanity distinguished the Shadow Tribe from the other races. Johann didn't know much about the Minstrel Louis or the Thief Mina, but their levels and equipment were no joke, either.

Where did Aki and Elias pick them up?

They say birds of a feather flock together—perhaps that was why powerful people tended to gather around Elias. Just like how Ivan Clarence and Lenard Gaines' descendants had become his two closest allies from the start of his journey.

Johann looked to Leo who was gritting his teeth against the strain of the Holy Dagger, and then to Aki who held her hands against her forehead to activate the Lunar Goddess's crest.

"Aki, Leo, you can do this. Please believe in yourselves and in me," he said, softly closing his eyes in prayer.

The Sanctuary isn't where I belong. Standing alongside Elias and my friends is where I really want to be—where I'm most comfortable. So I'm going to protect my place by bringing him back with my own hands! Not on anyone's orders, but because I want to!

"Come on, let's show Elias the power of our friendship!" Lines that would normally be too embarrassing to even think up came from him as naturally as breathing.

"Yeah!" his friends chimed in unison when he raised his valiant face.

It's okay. Everything will go well because we are working together. I can't believe it feels this great to work with them as just another party member and not a spy.

For the first time, Johann felt like he had finally become who he really was on the inside thanks to his friends.

Chapter 23: The Power of the Heart

AKI took a deep breath to concentrate every fiber in her body on drawing out the full strength of the Lunar Goddess. Successfully manifesting those powers ran the risk of losing control like Elias, so her intense concentration played two roles: activating the power and maintaining her sanity.

Holding the Holy Sword in one hand, Elias launched off the ground at an unprecedented speed, making the first move before they could finish getting ready.

The battle has begun!

Mina, Louis, and Sutcliff scattered in three directions, surrounding Elias at a distance.

Elias arrived in front of them at lightning speed, then bent his knees and pulled his sword back to release his air blades. But Sutcliff teleported in front of him, forcing him to switch into close combat mode.

Elias swung the Holy Sword toward Sutcliff, who read the movement, narrowed his eyes, and blocked the downward slash with crossed daggers.

Steel scraped steel in a spray of sparks.

Mina lunged forward and deftly brought down her knife. Sensing her seconds beforehand, Elias spun out of the way, gracefully dodging her attack. Waiting for just that moment, Sutcliff's summoned wolves lunged at Elias from every direction.

Not losing a beat, Louis cast the spell he had been chanting since the battle began. Roots burst from the ground and wrapped around Elias's feet, holding him in place so he couldn't keep sidestepping the wolves.

"We pulled it off, Johann...!" Louis informed them.

He had been waiting for the perfect moment to restrain Elias. Activating the ancient spell took enough time as it was, they couldn't risk missing their target by letting Elias move freely around the field. Sealing his movement was paramount to this plan's success.

With a nod and a smile at Louis, Johann looked from Aki to Leo and then pointed the Holy Spear at Elias. "Aki, Leo, I am going to recite the spell. Please repeat the words after me."

It's time! O Lunar Goddess, please lend me the strength to save Elias!

"Thinking of you beyond the heavens carves countless layers of sorrow into this bleeding heart." Johann's calm voice rang clearly through the domed field.

Aki repeated each word after him, careful not to make a single mistake, when she felt a sudden spark stinging the flesh on her

forehead.

As she listened to the words weaving the spell, she wondered if they were the lyrics to a song about heartbreak and a love that never came to fruition. Every spell in this world told a story—perhaps these ancient words were a hidden message to someone?

I wonder if the Lunar Goddess sung this poem about someone she loved. Aki had no proof, but some part of her knew it was true. It may have been the Lunar Goddess's power within her telling her so.

Heat licked at the corners of her forehead as if in answer to her speculation, and the outline of the crest grew increasingly warmer by the second.

Aki grimaced from the burning sensation. She felt her consciousness fade into the recesses of her mind. Afraid of what that meant, she bit the side of her cheek until it bled, and dug her feet into the ground to keep her mind anchored in place. This was where the real fight began. Passing out here meant the end of the line for them all.

I'm the only one who can stop Elias! She forced her eyes to remain open.

Leo and Johann's regal chanting boomed on either side of Aki, assisting her in her silent battle for dominance over the power roiling within. "Will my feelings for you be allowed at the end of the world?"

Did the Lunar Goddess suffer through unrequited love, too? I don't know who she's longing for, but her passion and sorrow calls to the powers simmering in the pit of my belly.

Immense power swelled within her like lava erupting from a mountain top. A terrifying surge of energy overflowed from every nerve ending in her body. In return, a haze clouded her eyes and her mind drifted away.

Between the faded scenery and her lapsing thoughts, she felt as if she were entrusting the use of her body over to someone else, and unknowingly let her eyes slide shut.

"Hey, Aki! Stay with me!" Leo shouted sharply beside Aki, causing her to jump.

Eh? Ahh. Wh-What? Did I just zone out?

Johann placed a nervous hand on Aki's shoulder. "Aki, please don't let your mind wander! You risk falling into the same state as Elias!"

"I-I'm sorry! I d-didn't even know it was happening..."

Aki hadn't even realized she had blanked out. She may have easily lost her mind to the Lunar Goddess's power if Leo and Johann hadn't spoken to her. And if she had, she would've turned on her friends just as Elias had.

She had averted courting disaster thanks to her friends, but Elias

had no one to help him through it when he manifested the Solar Goddess's overwhelming power. If only she had spoken to him and kept his mind grounded in the present!

I'm going to save Elias now to make up for failing to help him then!

Aki slowly and deeply exhaled to bring her mind into focus. "Johann, Leo, sorry about that! I'm back and ready to keep going!"

Sweat beaded their foreheads as they gave a tired but relieved nod on either side of her. Now that she had the mind to pay attention, she noticed their complexions were growing paler by the second. The strain of using the Holy Relics was immeasurable even for Adventurers at max level.

I can't afford to lose to the Lunar Goddess!

"These next words act as the closing line of the spell. Please concentrate all your energy into reciting them," Johann instructed.

The three of them shared looks and deeply inhaled in unison. They uttered the final words of the spell with every hope their voice would reach Elias. "My thoughts are with you at the distant ends of the land. Please let this desire...reach you!"

Their three voices overlapped during the final verse as Johann and Leo pointed their Holy Relics at Elias and swung down. On that signal, silver light burst forth from Aki's forehead, and spread in a wave over the entire field. The light shone on the blue flowers destroyed during battle, the broken cave walls, Mina, Louis, Sutcliff, and Elias, who stared at Aki with a grim expression.

"Hot!" Aki staggered and pressed one hand against her forehead.

Scorching heat emitted from her skull in accord with the burst of light radiating from her. It burned so bad her mind spun out of control. Letting down her guard for even a moment would see her blacked out on the ground

Endure! You can't lose to her powers here! I'm going to save Elias no matter what it takes!

"Elias, please...! Come back to us!"

Aki held her hands out toward Elias with every emotion she felt for him, believing that her bonds with him would become the power capable of bringing his mind back to the surface. She knew the love they expressed for each other was the strongest bond of all!

Had her intentions reached him? His blank eyes wavered for a moment, and a silver circle fanned out underneath his feet, demonstrating the success of the ancient magic they cast.

The large magic circle formed with complex, eerie letters Aki had never seen before covered half the field.

With one eye on Elias, whose head snapped down to stare at the glowing letters, Sutcliff teleported several feet out of the circle. Then he shouted to Mina and Louis who were squaring off with Elias. "Get

outta there, now!”

They didn’t need to be told twice. They both jumped back and out of the blinding light pulsating below their feet.

Only Elias remained in the center of the circle because his movement was still sealed by Louis’s spell.

A white flash ignited with a roar from the magic circle under his feet as if anticipating the very moment he was alone. Flashes of lunar lightning struck the ground around him, summoning forth pillars of blazing bolts from the ground to the domed ceiling.

This is the Lunar Goddess’s power? Fear of the overwhelming godlike thunder struck Aki speechless. Such dangerous power lives inside me? Her teeth began to chatter just as Elias started to tremble within the cage of light.

“A-AAAGGGGHHH!” he cried out in the most pain-ridden voice she had ever heard.

Aki covered her mouth and stared on in horror. “Elias...!”

No! Trapped in the cage of light, Elias was brought down to his knees by the unbelievable pain racking his entire body. No one told me that suppressing his powers would hurt him! Are my powers only capable of harming him?!

“I don’t want that...!” Watching the man she loved buckled over with the pain she caused him brought tears to her eyes.

I thought I was going to ease his pain by freeing him of the Solar Goddess! I didn’t know I would bring him pain instead!

In a panic, Aki destabilized the spell causing the pillars trapping Elias to flicker and sway.

“Aki, concentrate! You’re gonna disperse the spell!” Leo warned as he braced the Holy Dagger emitting the blinding flash of light that supported her magic.

“I kn-kno—” *I know.* She tried to answer with her face whiter than a sheet, but swallowed the words when Elias’s screams grew louder from the light tearing into his body.

She wanted to save him, not hurt him. But the reality before her eyes that ran contrary to her wishes crushed her. *And I promised to stay by his side and make him happy!*

Misery over her powerlessness to do that one thing for him made Aki sink to her knees. She hated herself for not being able to protect him. For being so weak she dragged him down.

“Elias, I’m so sorry...” she whimpered.

Leo and Johann each put a hand under her arms and pulled her off the ground. She glanced at each of their faces as tears slid down hers.

“Aki, what good does it do if you don’t believe in Elias?” Johann pointed out in a firm voice. “You are the only one who can save him.”

“You heard him! That guy’s helpless without ya, so you’ve gotta see him through this. Don’t wimp out on us now.” Leo removed one hand from the Holy Dagger and thumped her on the shoulder with it. Then he wiped the sweat from his brow and redirected his spirited gaze toward Elias. “Let’s get our Elias back. We can’t be the Hero Party without the Hero.”

That’s right! Everyone is waiting for him to return. And Elias is surely waiting for us to save him while enduring the pain and suffering.

“Johann. Leo. I’m going to Elias,” Aki announced without any preamble.

“...Aki? What’re you think—”

Invigorated with newfound purpose, she dashed off in a beeline for the cage of light eating into Elias.

“Hey! Oi, Aki! Wai—”

Leo’s calls to stop at her back, Aki propelled herself toward the imminent bolts of light without an ounce of fear. Sutcliff, Louis, and Mina locked shocked eyes on her when she ran past them.

“It’s dangerous, Aki!” Mina reached out to stop Aki, but she ran by her.

“I’ll be okay! I’m going to stop him with my own hands!” she answered between breaths.

She shouldn’t leave Elias alone in that prison of light. She shouldn’t isolate him. The reason was beyond her, but something inside told her it was so.

I promised I would be with him forever!

As she approached the bolts of light, the deafening roar muted out all other sound. Just how powerful was this small sliver of power she borrowed from the Lunar Goddess? Thinking about how she had access to such strength made her scared of herself. But she couldn’t stop now.

Aki paused right before the looming pillars and closed her eyes as she took a breath to still her thrashing heart. Then she gingerly reached out and brushed her fingers along the bars of light. It felt no different from touching a light bulb.

“Elias, I’m coming right now...!” she said as much for herself as for him. Then she took one step and another before taking the plunge and diving into the blinding magic circle.

Silver light consumed everything in view, distorting the scenery outside the circle. Surprisingly, she didn’t feel any pain within the magic circle. The spell likely only hurt Elias.

Through the pure white light she saw Elias propping himself up on one trembling knee, leaning against the Holy Sword he had thrust into the ground before him.

...*Elias!* Aki ran straight to him.

She wasn't scared that he might point his sword at her. All that filled her was the desire to talk to him and hold him in her arms.

Driven by the emotions coursing through her, she jumped the last few feet and threw her arms around his neck. "Elias! Are you all right?!"

Elias lifted his head and safely caught her in his arms. She wanted to cry at the nostalgic feel of his embrace. His silky golden locks and clear, beautiful eyes hadn't changed in the time they had been apart, except for the golden glow and the Solar Goddess's crest burning brightly on his forehead.

Elias forced his unfocused eyes on Aki and hoarsely wrenched out, "A...ki..."

"Elias! Can you hear me? Do you know who I am?!" Aki pulled back from their embrace and rested her hands on his shoulders.

Elias tilted his head down in a barely noticeable nod, then grimaced with immense pain. The Lunar Goddess's power was still gnawing away at him.

What must she do to free him? They had succeeded in casting the ancient magic. Perhaps he just needed an extra push to force back the Solar energy consuming him.

Aki clenched her fists in front of her chest. She wanted Elias to return to their group and smile at her. Say that he loved her again. She wanted to see him happily surrounded by friends.

Needing to convey those feelings to him, she cupped his cheeks, drenched in sweat from his exertions to withstand the pain, in her hands.



“...Elias,” she softly called his name as she brought her face near his. She pressed her lips against his, hoping the connection could convey her love and desire to save him. She entwined her hands around his neck and pulled his head closer. “I love you, Elias,” she whispered in his ear.

A single tear rolled down his cheek onto hers. He wrapped one arm around her and returned her hug by leaning into her. “...Thank you, Aki.”

The moment she heard him whisper those three words, their crests radiated the brightest light yet, illuminating the hugging couple in blinding luminance. The intense brightness rendered it impossible to tell where she began and he ended. But the silver glow blanketed them in warmth, not pain.

Elias and I are going to be just fine, she knew without a doubt as she melted into the torrent of light and let her consciousness fade to black in the arms of the man she loved.

Volume 2 End

To Be Continued in Volume 3 June 2020!

Afterword

THANK you all for patiently waiting for this volume! It's a pleasure to meet new readers and readers returning from Volume 1! I'm the author, Tsukasa Yamazaki.

I'm delighted to bring you *I Became the Secretary of a Hero! Volume 2*. I believe it's been a little over two years since we last met on these pages! I'm terribly sorry to have made you wait so long for the next step in Aki and Elias's journey! Thank you so much for continuing it with me!

Did you enjoy this second volume where the Hero and Dark Lord plot has thickened? Volume 1 was essentially the prologue to the overarching story, with Volume 2's main focus being on sweet romance and intense battles. It's my sincere hope that you were on the edge of your seat rooting for the Hero Party!

Almost the entire story took place in a cave this time, didn't it? We're all longing for the light of day, haha! Don't worry, Volume 3 mostly takes place outside!

Now then, I would love to take this opportunity to talk to you about the characters that appear in Volume 2.

First, there's Elias—he's more of an enemy than an ally this time. I have always wanted to write about what happens when the Hero, the greatest champion of good, becomes the villain, and so Elias gets to fill that role this volume.

Although he becomes an official couple with Aki after discovering their feelings are mutual, his love for her backfires in such a way that he hurts the woman he loves and all his friends. No one really thinks about what would happen if the Hero became their enemy. It's my greatest hope that I was able to get across the fact that the Hero is both the strongest and most fearsome being in the world through his scenes.

In the next volume he will have to do a lot of thinking and growing in order to get over losing confidence in himself as a Hero. And his relationship with Aki will also go through some turbulent changes in the process. How will they grow together as a couple? Stick around to find out!

Next up is the heroine, Aki. She has grown mentally and physically stronger since Volume 1, and is now able to fight heroically alongside her party members! I wrote her to be both an emotional pillar of support and an ally on the battlefield for her predominately male party.

Then there's Leo—I believe I gave him the best spot in the limelight this time around. He's so valiant battling with his life on the

line to save his best friend and to protect the woman he loves! Leo is the unsung hero of the Hero Party.

Meanwhile, Johann had to fight as hard as he could against the Moon Goddess possessed Nako before showing up just in time to gallantly save the Hero Party from the brink of death with his healing magic. He really has the coolest, most critically timed scenes! He knows the most about the secrets surrounding everyone, so he also plays a critical role as the explainer, haha!

We can't forget Mina and Louis, either! They formed a three-person party with Leo and have a huge role to play in saving their friends in the next volume. This pair will continue to be a huge support to the rest of the Hero Party going forward.

As for the Dark Lord and Nako, it's finally revealed that Dark Lord Kerdes suppressed the powers of the Moon Goddess hidden within Nako. You might find it interesting to go back and reread the chapter in Volume 1 called "The Promise on that Day" to see how it connects their story.

Last but not least, is the brand new character Sutcliff. He comes on stage as an enemy who does some terrible things to Elias and Aki before eventually trying to make amends. I made him into the type of character you just can't hate in the end. He tends to get easily carried away, but he means well! I hope you come to like him as much as I do!

It is all thanks to you, my many amazing readers, that I was able to publish *I Became the Secretary of a Hero! Volume 2* with its many colorful characters!

First, I want to thank the very talented Kiyu Kanae who drew the beautiful illustrations for Volume 1 and 2. Thank you so much for always breathing life into my characters. The characters you draw are always so expressive, full of life, and look like they will move right off the page! I absolutely love them! I hope you will continue to give life to them in the next volumes.

And a special thanks to Charis Messier for continuing to give me so much support and encouragement towards making Volume 1 and Volume 2 a possibility through your translations!

Finally, thank you so much to every single one of you who have been supporting me since Volume 1 and have now taken Volume 2 into your lives! Volume 2 only became possible because you enjoy this series so much. I humbly hope you will continue to support me from now on. I'm always looking forward to your fan letters, fan art, and fan fiction!

Thank you for reading this far. Let us meet again in Volume 3. Now, let's go on an adventurous journey to save the world!

From my home in wintry Japan
Tsukasa Yamazaki



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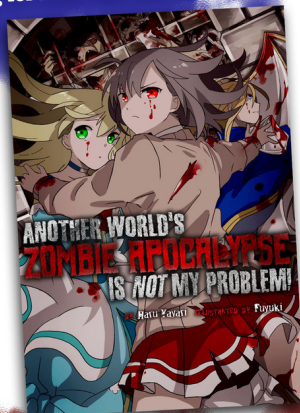
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